

西尾維新

NISIOISIN

四
FOUR

SWORD
TALE

KATANA

福の
GATARI

TRANSLATED BY
SAM BETT

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



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KATANAGATARI
Sword Tale

4

NISIOISIN

Art by take

Calligraphy by Hiroshi Hirata

Translated by Sam Bett



KATANAGATARI
SWORD TALE: FOUR

Katanagatari Dai Jyuuwa Seitou Hakari
Katanagatari Dai Jyuuichiwa Dokutou Mekki
Katanagatari Dai Jyuniwa Entou Jyuu

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NOTE ON THIS ENGLISH EDITION

This volume collects the fourth trio of a dozen-part series. The cover art was for the original Book Twelve, while Books Ten and Eleven's have been included as a gatefold.

Where appropriate, the transliterations provided in the footnotes add bars called "macrons" above vowels for a closer approximation of the pronunciation, including for names and words that appear without them in the main text. A syllable with "ō" is supposed to sound more like *boat* than *bot*. A repeated consonant like "CC" should be construed in the same manner as in *Rebecca*.

BOOK TEN

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刀
銚

SEITO
THE GARLAND

刀鎧

第十話

誠刀・銓

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終章

原案・作画：竹
原案・監修：平田弘史
構成・総作画監督：ウヰア
構成・総作画監督：(凸版印刷)

本文使用フォント：FOT、読者不明 Pro L



The original Book Ten Table of contents spread



PROLOGUE



■ ■

“—■■■”

Burning.

Burning. Burning.

Burning. Burning. Burning.

Burning—red hot.¹

Burning—ablaze.

All was burning.

All would burn away.

Burning up—and burning out.

“■■■—listen to me.”

Afire.²

Aflame.³

As if possessed of a tenacious, individual will, the conflagration spread and multiplied, all encompassing—a ring of fire.

For *us*.

Protecting *us* from something out there.

“■■■”

In air so hot that it was difficult to breathe—

You spoke to *me*.

Calling *my name*—the name that I’ve forgotten.

“It looks as though I’ve failed—we’re in a bind. I see no way of turning things around.”

Sounding utterly resigned.

No.

Nay—*you* had always been resigned.

Not like *I had any hope* of understanding *anything you said*—but one thing was for sure.

You understood from the beginning.

Knew that your plan⁴ would end in failure.

Knew that your plot⁵ would end a failure.

Knew all along.

Knowing—well aware.

What it was you knew, though, *I’ve* forgotten—

But *you* were thoroughly resigned.

Starting off with no delusion of success—which is what made your deeds so wicked.

Never expecting to succeed, and banking on your failure—indeed.

Nothing to hide, nor anything to show.

There we were.

Engulfed in flame—hot air so suffocating we could nary see a foot ahead, just as you predicted.

As planned, from the beginning.

All you wanted was to know for certain that your efforts were in vain—to make sure, once more, and for good measure, that despite your every precaution, and having planned things so assiduously, you nevertheless failed.

Which explained—that smug⁶ look on your face.

A face announcing you had no regrets.

“So this is how I meet my ruin—hah. Pretty interesting turn of events, I must say...”

You have to admit.

Indeed.

Though knowing you would fail—*you never knew* exactly how.

How history would *rewrite* itself.

How history would *expunge*⁷ you.

Those things were beyond your control.

Not if, but *how* to fail.

That was all this struggle ever meant—all that the thousand-thousand⁸ war dead, friend and enemy alike, could ever mean *to you*.

“This history is all wrong.”

You.

Repeating those words *I had heard before*—only to forget.

“I’ve done my part to show just how wrong it is—but for the time being, my work is done. It sure could have been easier—don’t expect me to do that again. I’m not cut out for this line of work—I’m a homebody at heart, just trying to muddle through, between our family vacations. Don’t ask me how things came to this—but all the same.”

You told me.

“In the end, ■■■, I’ve said all I had to say, and that’s what counts.”

Had to say?

What are you saying?

You hadn’t told *me* anything—

You’d said nothing.

You were severed from me—

What was it?

What were you trying to explain?

“Damn—”

You cast your eyes beyond the flames.

And on your face—a smile.

You were laughing, like you were amazed.

“I’m going to burn to death regardless, even if they let me be, but it would seem there is one man left among them who believes in following formalities.⁹ It’s too bad. If I had my druthers, ■■■ would be the last person I spoke to—but alas. This thing called history is too cruel for words—ah, well.”

And then *you* turned to *me*.

“Hide in there—and don’t come out, no matter what. If history proceeds as I suspect—and if the lessons I have garnered from this failure prove a fact, then you, and only you, will make it out alive. The sole survivor of this gruesome chapter in our history.”

History will make a place for you.

At least for now.

Not like this—made any sense to me.

“If I cared more about the code of the samurai, ■■■—this would be when I put you out of your misery...but I cannot help myself from taking pity on you. Killing you is one thing I could never do, even if correcting this flawed history depends on it. We’re good as dead, but I can’t force myself to take you with me.”

That’s what *you* said.

Saying things that *I’ve forgotten*.

“How could I kill—my own daughter?”

You said that.

Then *you* stuffed *me* in a closet—and I was too small¹⁰ to fight back.

How did I react?

Did I cry?

Bawl my eyes out?

Huff and puff?

Howl?

I can’t remember.

All I remember—is that right after you shoved me in there, locking me away, a man appeared—piercing the ring of fire.

He was a swordsman.

Except he had no sword.

The Swordless Swordsman—

“Well, well, well, Mutsue. They send you here to kill me?”

You played dumb.

The Swordless Swordsman answered you—without so much as glancing toward me.

[illegible]

I'm not sure what he said.

I don't remember.

Nor would I care to.

Because the Swordless Swordsman—

The Swordless Swordsman took your life.

And right before he did.

Somehow—you stood there.

Laughing.

“Hah hah hah!”

Laughing—just like that.

“Wow, this tops everything, Mutsue—to think that things would come to this. Me left with no choice but to die at your hand, and you with no choice but to

kill me. I have no hope of combatting your swordplay, while you must have a thousand different ways that you could take my life—how can one human being have so much power over another?”

“■■■■■■■■■■”

“Now, don’t misunderstand me—I’m not complaining, and I’m not giving in.¹¹ It’s just too funny. I know I’m up against the wall, but I’m amused at how inconsequential¹² this all feels—besides. This history is so unbelievably wrong, I have to laugh.”

You said.

That's what *you* said.

"■■■■■■■■■■■"

“Afraid not, Mutsue. If anyone has had their hands tied up by history, it’s you—though I suppose that it’s not you, so much as your whole school, the Kyotoryu. Granted, you have every right to be an imbecile, but if at all possible, try to spare posterity from your idiocy—for starters, don’t force your son and daughter to carry the same weight.”

“■■■?”

“Did I confuse you? Oh well. Why even bother trying to get through to you? Hey, don’t take it personally. I don’t hate you or your kind. It really is a pity that the two of us had to wind up pitted against one another. If you had been my ally, perhaps history could have been corrected—though at this point, so be it. There’s no way around it.”

With that.

You took a seat.

Turning your back on the Swordless Swordsman—so that you faced *me*.

Wearing that usual audacious look of yours.

In your usual stance, ready to laugh off history, wrong as it was—you looked at *me*.

“■■■—■■■!”

A katana flashed—aimed at *your* neck.

The nonexistent sword—of the Swordless Swordsman.

Raised high.

Gleaming—ready to take your acquiescent head.

“■■■!”

These were your last words.

“I need to leave you now—but one more thing! Even if nothing I’ve said got through to you, and even if you forget everything else about me—remember this!”

Except *I did* forget.

I can’t remember what he said—

“I ■■■■ you ■■■■■■!”

This was supposed to be the most important part.

But I forgot it.

His words left me—along with the color of my hair.



And so the Sword Hunt brings us from one climax to another.

As Togame the Schemer arrives in Mutsu, returning home a stranger.

Only three left of the Twelve Possessed, those masterworks of legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki—but as we near the end of our adventure, its bitter ends begin to come together!

Just three more episodes left in this Saga of Katanas!

Togame the Schemer! Princess Negative! The Maniwa!

Their three-way struggle is finally nearing its conclusion—at least, probably!

This flowery battle, this florid family feud!

Slicing the corpse of this period piece to pieces—say what?!

Sword Tale, Book Ten ♪

¹ 赤々と AKA AKA TO “red ditto-ly”

² 火が HI GA the fire ³ 炎が HONŌ GA the flames (fire written twice) ⁴ 企て KUWADATE strategy ⁵ 企み TAKURAMI ploy ⁶ 納得したような NATTOKU SHITA YŌNA satisfied-seeming ⁷ 肅清 SHUKUSEI clear (from the record) *e.g.* 大肅清 DAISHUKUSEI Great Purge ⁸ 幾千幾万 IKUSEN IKUMAN how many thousand, how many tens of thousands ⁹ 律儀 RICHIGI upright (citizen); (doing things) by the book ¹⁰ 幼かった OSANA KATTA was young, undeveloped ¹¹ 嘆いて[...]投げ出して NAGEITE[...]NAGEDASHITE

wail[...]throw (a match) ¹² 危機感を感じない KIKIKAN WO KANJINAI feeling
no sense of danger

CHAPTER ONE
ZANKI
KIGUCHI
(REPRISE)



Not to put on airs,¹ but this time around, let's start off with a reminiscence—though not so very far into the past.

Only a month ago.

At the juncture of our story when Togame the Schemer, Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu, and Shichika Yasuri, the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, were just about to take their leave from Shogi Village, the holy land of shogi players in Tendo, in Dewa, where they had journeyed in the hopes of capturing Oto the Cured, one of the Twelve Possessed, the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki.

Zetto the Leveler. Zanto the Razor. Sento the Legion. Hakuto the Whisper. Zokuto the Armor. Soto the Twin. Akuto the Eel. Bito the Sundial.

Standing apart from the owners of the other eight Possessed which they had captured, Zanki Kiguchi, Twelfth Master of the Heartland School and owner of Oto the Cured, proved an unlikely steward of a Mutant Blade.

Her nerves were like taut string.

Her sword was made of wood.

Wooden, yet nevertheless lethal.

She was the owner of Oto the Cured, the only Shikizaki blade that was

without venom—that actually leached venom away, invested with the power to detoxify.

Which brings us to the day after our heroes prized Oto the Cured from Kiguchi—sole guardian of her school.

Shichika Yasuri visited the Heartland Dojo on his own.

Togame, who had her hands full packaging Oto the Cured for shipment and converting the nitty gritty details² of their conquest into another one of her reports, remained at the inn where they were staying—or rather, she was so engrossed with her work that Shichika was at a loss for what to do and figured that he may as well walk over to the Heartland Dojo to kill time.

Packing up the sword was one thing, but writing the report would probably take her hours. Too long for him to sit there on his hands.

After all, now that Togame's tale of the Sword Hunt had won her considerable praise within the bakufu, it made sense that she would pour her heart and soul into its composition—Shichika could see that.

But he was aware of something else.

Because her rival,³ Princess Negative—Inspector General of the Yanari Shogunate and sworn enemy of Togame the Schemer, was among the many avid readers of her accounts of their adventure, Togame could not exactly write them with the innocent disclosure of a civil servant reporting back to her superiors.

She had to weave together fact and fiction.

Which is why—they took her lots of time to write.

Since nothing was more difficult for Shichika than the subtleties of politics,

even being in the same room with her while she was working made it hard for him to breathe—so he excused himself and headed over to the Heartland Dojo, situated in the middle of Shogi Village.

He had spent ten days at this dojo as a follower.

To some extent, perhaps he wished he could have stayed there longer—a questionable sentiment, since he was the current master of his school, the Kyotoryu, but regardless.

“Hey.”

Shichika left his straw sandals by the door and stepped up into the dojo.

Like he owned the place.⁴

“Well, if it isn’t Master Shichika.”

Kiguchi greeted him, but only after she completed her set number of repetitions—it had taken her some time to even notice he was there.

Her powers of concentration were astounding.

As goes without saying, the wooden sword she held was not Oto the Cured—but there was nothing different about her disposition.

Mopping away her sweat with a tenugui, Kiguchi walked over to Shichika.

“Everything alright?” she asked.

Shichika was unsure of what to say.

He had no real reason for being there—he had simply been bored of sitting around the inn and needed to get out. He had wandered over to the dojo partly by force of habit.

Kiguchi helped Shichika along.

“If I’m not mistaken, the two of you are heading back to Owari tomorrow or the day after,” she said, setting the topic. “I was planning to see you off, but since you’re dropping by like this, Master Shichika, perhaps your plans have changed—”

“No, that’s still the plan—I was just in the neighborhood.”

As he spoke, Shichika reached for the wooden sword that Kiguchi was holding.

“Think I could try that for a sec?”

“Of course, by all means...”

Handing Shichika her sword, Kiguchi looked a little puzzled.

And why not?

She knew all about the Kyotoryu.

Knew about the Swordless Swordsman—and his school.

She knew that Shichika was known as the “Swordless Swordsman” for good reason—inept not only when it came to wooden swords, but every kind of sword imaginable, hewn from stone or forged from steel. Hearing him ask to try hers would be enough to puzzle anyone.

Unbothered by her reaction, Shichika went ahead and tested out the sword.

Needless to say—it wasn’t pretty.

To be blunt—it was disturbing.

Though Shichika had practiced with a wooden sword in his ten days as a follower of the Heartland School, he had hardly gotten used to it.

He could barely even hold the thing.

And that was with a wooden sword.

What would happen with a real sword—

Or one of the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki?

What would happen—if he held one of the Twelve Possessed?

“...Master Shichika?” said Kiguchi, sounding worried. “You look unwell—be careful not to overexert yourself.”

“Oh, no—don’t worry, it’s not like holding a sword is enough to make me queasy.” Or so he replied, promptly returning the wooden sword to Kiguchi. “It’s interesting, though, how fighting with you made me realize how weird it is to call the Kyotoryu a school of swordplay. Back on the island, I barely gave it any thought.”

Then it hit him.

Wow.

I’m here because of what Kiguchi told me yesterday—

Feeling bored sitting around the inn, wishing he could stay at the dojo a little longer, and wandering over here by force of habit—all of that was little more than an excuse.

You see.

What Kiguchi said to Shichika had gotten in his craw.

“Do you remember—what you told me yesterday?”

“ ... ”

Kiguchi looked confused.

“What I said—could you be more specific?”

“You know, about the curse and all.”

“Oh.”

This would hardly seem to be enough to jog her memory, but Kiguchi caught his drift. While she had a tendency to take things way too seriously, overall she was perceptive.

“I do remember saying that it *felt like some kind of a curse*. I was speaking, of course, to the way that your abilities, Master Shichika, are more readily apparent when you fight without a sword, as opposed to fighting with one—but in retrospect, my choice of words was awfully disrespectful. Please forgive me.”

Kiguchi bowed her head.

Shichika panicked.

“Whoa, no need to apologize.”

This conversation was not exactly going smoothly.

Shichika may have been an insensitive rube, a wild boy unable to take a hint, but after over half a year of traveling alongside Togame, he had lost his innocence to some degree and gained a certain sensitivity, an ability to read between the lines, at least occasionally. Yet as a result, he had grown uncomfortable with the simple act of *carrying on a conversation*.

He was ashamed of being such a lousy conversationalist.

At times like this, he wished he had even a tenth of Togame’s charisma.⁵

It was so hard for him to share his thoughts.

“Honestly, I think you were exactly right—I hadn’t thought of it that way, but it makes a lot of sense. So, I was thinking—”

Kyotoryu.

From the First Master, Kazune Yasuri—up on through the Sixth Master, Mutsue

Yasuri, celebrated as the Hero of the Rebellion, to the current master, Shichika Yasuri.

Not one of them—could swing a sword to save his life.

Which is why—they called them swordless swordsmen.

“—Suppose you’re right, and I am actually cursed, I was hoping you could tell me more.”

Hence—why he came.

Essentially sneaking away⁶ from Togame.

Shichika, her supposedly loyal bodyguard, had come over to the dojo on his own, without asking for permission.

“Oh, but Master Shichika—”

Kiguchi looked like she was in a fix.

“I must admit that I was careless to use a word like *curse* so lightly—but think of it as a kind of joke. I’ve never heard of anything along those lines about your school.”

“Wait, really?”

“Really—I’m terribly sorry for causing this confusion. This sort of slip is out of character for me.”

Again, she bowed her head.

Though Shichika was not seeking an apology.

“Huh.”

I guess that makes sense.

Not like Shichika actually thought that he was “cursed” simply because he

couldn't swing a sword—besides, he didn't even believe in curses.

And neither did Togame.

While they saw the world from different perspectives, Shichika and Togame were alike, in that both of them were realists.⁷

“Yeah—but that guy Sabi said something similar, which kinda made me wonder.”

“Sabi?”

This name struck a chord with Kiguchi.

Hers was not a sword for killing, but for cultivating the soul—as a swordsman, however, she could not help but perk up when she heard this name.

“You mean—Hakuhei Sabi?”

“Yeah...wait, didn't I tell you? He used to own one of the Mutant Blades, like you.”

“Is that so...”

Kiguchi sighed with admiration.

This comparison of status was not exactly fair. Up until about six months ago, when Shichika had battled Sabi, he had been owner of Hakuto the Whisper, one of the Twelve Possessed, the thinnest and most delicate sword in existence, as well as the most beautiful, nothing like Zanki Kiguchi, who had taken on Oto the Cured as a matter of course, a mantle passed down from the previous generation when she became Twelfth Master of the Heartland School—

But there was no way Shichika could articulate these particulars.

After he spoke, he was aware that he had cut too many corners with his explanation, but the thought of what would be required to set things straight

was enough to make him let it go.

All that she needed to know, Shichika concluded, was the fact that he had fought Sabi.

“So, Master Shichika, you struck down the mighty Sabi, the Strongest Swordsman in Japan—I’m so embarrassed I was ignorant of this. What kind of swordsman does that make me?”

“Word spread around Kyushu—but only because we fought on Ganryu Island in Suo. It seems like people haven’t really heard about it north of Edo, much less up here in Dewa.”

At least according to Togame.

“I guess it’s a matter of time.”

“I wish you had mentioned this sooner.”

“Yeah, but considering how pitiful a sight I was armed with a wooden sword, you think you would’ve believed me if I’d told you that I beat Hakuhei Sabi?”

“Hmm—maybe not.”

Though not going so far as to apologize again, Kiguchi nodded solemnly, looking ashamed of her lack of sophistication.

She must have heard his question as a jab.⁸

This conversation—was hopeless.

He felt bad for Zanki Kiguchi—dead serious, the polar opposite of his personality. Up against somebody as overwhelmingly⁹ severe as her, most anybody would have had a difficult time carrying on a conversation.

“Well—what exactly did Master Sabi tell you?”

“Uhh...”

Shichika scrambled to remember.

“Something about the Kiki Pedigree...not too sure. Anyway, I know he said the Kyotoryu was bound to him.”

“Bound, you say?”

“Yeah, he said the Kyotoryu was bound to Kiki Shikizaki—something about how we can’t escape his lineage—because he made the Kyotoryu as a memento or something... To be honest, I have no idea what he was saying. Even Togame had to admit she was confused—”

“I can understand if it was just you, but if Madame Togame was unable to make any sense of what he said, that makes it quite the riddle.”

This comment sounds like something of a dis on¹⁰ Shichika’s intellect, but opposite as these two may have been in some respects, they were a perfect match, in that they spoke without feeling the need to crack jokes or make snide remarks.

In that sense, if not in any other, their conversation was exquisite.

“When you said *curse*, it made me think of when Sabi said the word *bound*—though I dunno, maybe there’s no connection. Since you’re both swordsmen, I guess you might have similar reactions.”

“I’m nowhere near deserving of comparison with the Sword Saint, Hakuhei Sabi.”

“Stop being so modest—to be honest, I’ve been kinda bummed I can’t just go all-out against a swordsman strong as you—”

“I’m sorry that I failed to meet your expectations—but my teaching holds me

back.¹¹ As Master of the Heartland School, I am unable to engage in mortal combat...”

With that.

Kiguchi paused—like she was thinking.

When she grew quiet, Shichika stopped talking.

Forced to wait until she spoke again.

“While I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about your wish to fight me uninhibited, there is something I can do to alleviate at least a little bit of the frustration that you seem to be experiencing.”

“Huh?”

“Just a moment.”

Carrying the sword that Shichika had returned to her, Kiguchi went to the edge of the room and placed it on the dojo floor.

Next, she doffed the jacket of her gi, thoroughly¹² soaked with sweat after long hours of practice, and placed it, folded, by the sword.

While Kiguchi looked thin even in her beefy gi, her body thus exposed looked even thinner—and while her breasts were of average size, they were wrapped tightly¹³ with a sash,¹⁴ to keep them out of the way.

Keeping on her hakama, Kiguchi proceeded to the center of the room, stripped to the waist but for the sash around her chest.

Being unsure of where to look—was no issue for Shichika. His inchoate sensitivity had yet to reach the point where the sight of a half-naked woman registered as such.

“Over here, Master Shichika,” said Kiguchi.

“Huh? What are you doing over there?”

Though full of questions, Shichika did as he was told and walked over to Kiguchi—before halting once he was a short distance away from her.

He felt the spirit¹⁵ emanating from Kiguchi.

The spirit—of the fight.¹⁶

The aura he had felt when they had fought the day before—

“I think you know exactly what we’re doing—”

Kiguchi spoke—and took position.

Ready for kenpo.

Kenpo—not swordplay.¹⁷

“—This time, I thought we’d fight each other emptyhanded.”

Thus far, Shichika Yasuri had fought Zanki Kiguchi on three different occasions—the first and second of which involved both of them using wooden swords.

The third time, Shichika went barehanded, while Kiguchi used a wooden sword.

But now—for their fourth battle, Kiguchi was proposing something new.

This time—the two of them would fight barehanded.

“You mean...you can do kenpo, too?”

“We’ll see,” Kiguchi answered. “Come over here and find out for yourself—I know it’s frustrating, but I’ll still need for you to go easy on me. You see, this is my first time entering a fight without a sword—”

“ ...”

Their fourth fight.

Although without Togame, who had thus played the role of referee, there was no one there to give the signal to fight. Hence, once Shichika moved—the battle had begun.

Still unsure of what Kiguchi was trying to do, Shichika started going with the flow and tried a shuto—though holding back significantly.

Putting far less oomph¹⁸ into the move, he in fact sliced his hand that much faster.

Yet Kiguchi deftly dodged the shuto he had fired at her breast—using the opportunity to make a run at Shichika’s torso.

Closing the space between them in an instant.

“...nkk!”

This was enough to make Shichika go tense all over—their strange duel may have started without explanation, at first posing no threat to him whatsoever, but nobody had closed in on him so easily since his showdown against Hakuhei Sabi.

His body responded, operating out of reflex.

Kneejerk reaction.¹⁹

“Kyotoryu—Mokuren! Kyotoryu—Noichigo!”

Using his knees and elbows, he countered Kiguchi at close quarters—the Mokuren being a flying knee kick, and the Noichigo a flurry of elbows. Not to the face, but body blows which, if delivered effectively, would flense²⁰ the very skin and muscle from his adversary.

Shichika had meant—to pull his punches.

But he had countered out of reflex.

He may have pulled his punches—but they’d land with full force.

Up against these knees and elbows, Kiguchi evaded him by shifting her upper body, without moving her feet. Bending gracefully backwards—and snapping back to her original position.

Planting a headbutt in his chest.

Gently.

Yet after his serial misses, this gentle attack was plenty—to make Shichika stumble.

He took a step back, managing to stand his ground, but Kiguchi doubled back—squatting for a second only to burst straight upwards and whack him with the heel of her palm—grazing Shichika’s jaw.

“Ugh...”

Feeling his brain jiggle in his skull—Shichika somehow managed to catch her arm.

And with that, Shichika thought, the fight was his.

Although the Kyotoryu was fundamentally a school of swordplay, and thus designed for fighting swordsmen—an emptyhanded enemy did not require different moves.

Countering kenpo was no problem.

Like when Nanami Yasuri fought Chocho Maniwa.

Raised in the peculiar setting of Haphazard Island, Shichika was so

accustomed to fighting emptyhanded that it almost made him homesick—after all, he had spent nineteen years training exclusively under the late master of his school, Mutsue Yasuri.

“Kyotoryu—Kikyo!”²¹





Shichika went to twist Kiguchi by the arm—in a grappling move intent on locking the enemy's shoulder and elbow in one go.

This would seem to guarantee his victory.

However, this time around Kiguchi used her lower body to break free—spinning away before Shichika could make the twist, freeing herself from his hand.

But there was more.

Using the momentum of her spin—she threw her weight into her shoulder and slammed it into him.

Making a direct hit.

Because of the vast difference in size and weight, Kiguchi was hardly able to throw Shichika backwards—but perhaps by chance, her thin shoulder nailed Shichika in the lung, knocking the wind out of him momentarily.

So that he gasped for air.

No time to catch his breath.

Shichika was well aware—painfully aware. Unable to inhale, he did his best to make a counterstrike.

He had to make some space.

Close range—was her domain.

He was too close to make a hit.

By now he understood why she had doffed her gi and stripped down to her hakama—it was easier to move. That simple. Her speed was on an entirely different level from when she was encumbered by her pads and wooden sword.

Yet this awareness was not enough to explain the unexpected quickness of her reflexes—Kiguchi the swordsman and the Kiguchi he faced now did not match up as the same person. Shichika expected her to move far slower. The breach of expectation was debilitating.

His panting counterstrike dodged summarily, thrashing like a wounded animal—he gave Kiguchi yet another chance to make a hit.

This time, hammering the heel of her hand downward.

Ordinarily, the move would have targeted the crown, but due to the aforementioned differences in stature, she came dangerously close to nailing him in the collarbone.

Shichika had been so conscious of their “different stature” that he ruled out any possibility of a hit from above. It was all that he could do to dodge the move—

No time to think of what came next.

He failed to realize that the swat was only the beginning.

“Whew—”

Kiguchi followed through, letting her palm reach the dojo floor, so that for a moment she crouched forward—and then.

Propping one hand on the floor, she sprung her body up.

From a handstand, she swept her legs along an oblique path, in a graceful swinging kick. This would have taken off the head of somebody less tall, but up against Shichika it cut an arc that passed just below his armpit, right over his pectorals.

He never saw this coming.

The very notion of her going from a handstand to a kick was unimaginable to Shichika—not like the Kyotoryu was lacking similar attacks, but he would have never expected Kiguchi to make a move like that.

“Grh, ugh—”

Shichika took the full brunt of the kick.

Neither intentionally nor courageously, he caught her foot square in the chest—though it was not too much for him to take.

From there, he hoisted up her leg.

As if to scoop her up.

Propped up on a single hand, Kiguchi was unable to defend herself and tumbled to the floor—expecting her to spring up right away, Shichika leapt back and took position.

“Ouch!” Kiguchi said. She sat where she had fallen, no sign of standing up. “Wow, well done—I thought that I could fend you off a little while longer, but I guess I reached my limit. You beat me, Master Shichika.”

“Huh?”

“In four fights, I’ve bested you only once—truly remarkable.”

After a beat, Kiguchi worked her way back up to standing.

“How are you feeling, Master Shichika? Have I given you some small amount of succor?”²²

“Hmm, I’m not really sure,” Shichika answered candidly, relaxing his stance. “So wait—you know kenpo just as well as swordplay?” he continued. “I can’t believe how well you dodged my moves—that was insane. Pretty bold of you to lie to my face, though, calling that the first time that you fought someone

barehanded—”

“I tell no lies. I’m constitutionally unable to do so. I have to tell it like it is,” Kiguchi insisted. “I’ll give you this, though, Master Shichika. They say that mastery of one art means mastery of a thousand—it’s true. I have so much to learn, but as a swordsman, I count myself among the masters of the art, though somewhere toward the bottom. Hence—if challenged to a fight, even barehanded, I’m able to hold my own, to some extent.”

“To some extent? Come on!”

“Okay, but you only see things that way because we jumped straight into battle, without any preamble—all I did was catch you by surprise. Surely, you were not expecting me to come at you with kenpo?”

“Nope, I wasn’t.”

“Right. *And you know what? Strictly speaking, I wasn’t using kenpo*—I was just pretending that I knew what I was doing. But even so, I’m able to hold my own to some extent—as you have seen.”

“So, are you saying...”

Shichika considered this.

Thinking, in an attempt to figure out what Kiguchi wanted him to take away from this.

“When I had to use the wooden sword, it was so *strange* how weak I felt—like my body was refusing to grip the sword.”

“Because it was,” Kiguchi nodded. “Hence why I used the word *curse*—and why Master Sabi said that you were *bound*. We extol swordplay as a fine art, but at a fundamental level, you’re just swinging a stick around—the wooden sword is the most primitive and violent of all weapons. Hardly what you might

call refined. Under ordinary circumstances, no warrior should be weaker thusly armed.”

“So you’re saying—that even if I am the Kyotoryu, it makes no sense that I can’t hold my own armed with a sword, even if it doesn’t help me much, since you can fight without a sword and still do fine?”

“All I’m saying is perhaps...the obstacle was forced upon you.”

Kiguchi chose her words with care.

“What I mean is—perhaps you’ve just been led to believe that holding a sword will make you weaker. That doing so would be unnatural for the Kyotoryu—were you not raised to think this way? It’s possible this expectation—has inhibited your very physical abilities—”

“I doubt it—but I wouldn’t rule it out.”

What about his genius of a sister?

Not like she was fully liberated from the *curse*.

But her ability to defeat her less-than-genius brother could largely be credited to her ability to wield Akuto the Eel, one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki, despite being an exemplar of the Kyotoryu.

“Maybe so, Master Shichika. But regardless, I imagine there are other reasons—persistent and essential reasons, in the absence of which the story would not add up.”

“Hmm.”

“This is just a hunch, Master Shichika, based on my own experience as a swordsman—but just as the Heartland School has certain precepts that make it what it is, I would venture to say these reasons, if you will, are what makes the

Kyotoryu the discipline it is. And I have a feeling that these things cannot be easily defined—as skills or lack thereof.”

Zanki Kiguchi, Twelfth Master of the Heartland School.

With that, she ended the scene.



This reminiscence catches us up on some stray details from the last installment.

Hereafter, Togame the Schemer, having realized Shichika was missing, headed over to the dojo, only to discover what could easily be mistaken for a clandestine rendezvous²³ between the swordsmen (one of whom was bare to the waist, the other stripped down to the sash around her breasts), causing yet another one of the conniptions²⁴ prompted by renewed suspicion of a love affair, but since this represents business as usual, let us forge ahead.

¹ もったいぶる MOTTAI BURU act pretentiously ² 顛末 TENMATSU all the particulars ³ 政敵 SEITEKI “political opponent”

⁴ 勝手知ったる他人の家 KATTE SHITTARU TANIN NO IE making yourself a little too much at home ⁵ 交渉術 KŌSHŌJUTSU negotiating abilities ⁶ 眼を盗む ME WO NUSUMU “steal the eye”

⁷ 現実主義者 GENJITSU SHUGISHA pragmatists ⁸ 皮肉 HINIKU sarcasm; cutting remarks more generally ⁹ 一辺倒 IPPENTŌ “falling to one side”

¹⁰ 低く見積もった HIKUKU MITSUMOTTA estimate on the low end ¹¹ 垣根 KAKINE fence; barrier (to action) ¹² ぐっしょり GUSSHORI onomatopoeia for drenched ¹³ がっちり GACCHIRI onomatopoeia for constraint ¹⁴ さらし SARASHI wide strip of cotton, usually white and worn to protect or warm the organs ¹⁵ 覇気 HAKI “overwhelming spirit” dynamism ¹⁶ 闘気 TŌKI “battle spirit” bellicosity ¹⁷ 拳法 剣法 KENPŌ KENPŌ “law/method of the fist” vs. “law/method of the sword”

¹⁸ 威力 IRYOKU “menacing power”

¹⁹ 反射神経 HANSHA SHINKEI “reflex nerves”

²⁰ 切り裂く KIRI SAKU “cut and tear”

²¹ 桔梗 KIKYŌ “The Bellflower”

²² 風穴を開ける KAZA ANA WO AKERU “open air holes” breathe life (into a tired situation) ²³ 密会 MIKKAI “secret meeting”

²⁴ 癩癢 KANSHAKU angry fit



CHAPTER TWO

HYAKKEIJO



Takahito Hida, Kaoyaku of Oshu.

There was a time when his domain, entrusted to him as a daimyo, was so vital that it bore comparison to the Capital and to Owari, the seat¹ of the Yanari Shogunate—but those days were gone now, lost with the late Rebellion.

Lo, the Rebellion.

The only thing close to a war to have occurred under the rule of the Owari Bakufu, which reigned over the land under the slogan “Peace and Order”—though as of late, its legacy was losing relevance.

Which makes sense—after all, it had been over twenty years.

The ranks of those who knew naught of the war had grown.

As had the number of people unaware that this city had once prospered—to their generation, Oshu was synonymous with a disgraceful obsolescence.

If there was one place you could call a destination.

Then it was Hyakkeijo²—the site of Hida Castle, once home to Takahito Hida.

The place where those linked with the Rebellion he had launched had been exterminated by the new regime.



“Ugh...”

So.

The instant that Togame the Schemer set foot on the grounds of Hyakkeijo, her face became distraught and her displeasure audible.

Her appearance was the same as ever—

White hair that would have stood out anywhere.

The seemingly dozen layers of brash and brilliant silk.

Down to her flat-soled seta—but her face was out of character, uncomfortably disturbed.

The man standing beside her—stripped to the waist and dressed in but a hakama, wearing arm and leg guards, tousled hair, was Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu. Though not exactly the observant type, he had noticed something had come over Togame and found it hard to speak or even look her way. And so he gazed ahead.

Ahead—toward Hyakkeijo.

Where once stood Hida Castle.

It was a veritable slaughterhouse—though long since razed, the land having been used for public executions in only those few years following the late Rebellion. By now, there was no artifact or structure left to indicate its history.

Silly³ to call this place a destination.

When it was no more than a field.

Not a whiff of its lost function as a killing ground, or of the castle that once stood there—no more than an open piece of land.

Shichika had heard that Hida Castle went up in flames in the end, leaving not a cinder,⁴ and that in its years used as a site of capital punishment, the means of execution were not exactly, shall we say...sophisticated. Seeing it now, its history may come as a surprise.

*—I figured it would be a whole lot creepier,*⁵ he thought.

Though he knew better not to say as much—with Togame looking so upset beside him.

Her family.

Her close relations.

Nearly all of whom—were slaughtered on these grounds.

“...”

Togame the Schemer, Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu—whose name and origins were unknown, and who had edged her way into the inner circle of the bakufu, was in actuality connected to the insurgence—being the daughter of Takahito Hida, Kaoyaku of Oshu and principal figure⁶ of the Rebellion.

Positioning herself within the government.

Channeling her energies toward rounding up the Twelve Possessed.

Every effort but a means for her revenge against the bakufu.

Her careerist inclinations,⁷ too, were no more than a means to gain direct audience with His Excellency, the Yanari Shogun.

And so—of course Togame lost her usual composure upon entering these grounds, the very soil of which was supersaturated with⁸ justification for her vengeance.

—That said.

The fact that his own father, Mutsue Yasuri, the “Hero of the Rebellion,” had been the one who struck down⁹ her father, Takahito Hida, made it especially difficult for Shichika to discuss the particulars of the situation with Togame...

—The castle is gone because this is where Takahito Hida died.

Shichika remembered his father’s heroic retelling of the event.

How he entered the burning castle on his own and took the head of Takahito Hida, who likely would have otherwise burned into obscurity with Hida Castle—

An exploit that had won him accolades as “Hero of the Rebellion.”

This was the peak of life for Mutsue Yasuri, who shortly after found himself marooned.

Hyakkeijo.

The premise and the catalyst behind the deeds of Togame the Schemer.

And the circumstances linking her with Shichika Yasuri—were all here.

Though no more than a field.

These things persisted, in the land as in the air.

“...I don’t like this place one bit.”

Finally—at long last.

Togame the Schemer opened her mouth to speak.

When they arrived, the sun had been high overhead, but at this point it was making its way down—Togame had spent hours maintaining that moody silence.

Shichika doing his best to keep her company.

“I was so confident I had this hunt for the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki in the bag—but out of nowhere, the Princess got the better of me...”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Shichika nodded at Togame. “Things have been pretty weird—at least since Bito the Sundial. And Seito the Garland feels like more of the same. You think—she knows the whereabouts of the other two swords? Dokuto the Basilisk and Ento the Bead—”

“We can’t even say for sure that Seito the Garland¹⁰ is still here. Both times we’ve returned to Owari, the Princess has given us new information on the swords, almost like she’s pushing us away¹¹—isn’t that strange? I mean, I can see once, but twice?”

Shichika could not help but agree with this concern¹² wholeheartedly. Standing by during her conversation with the Princess, he had asked himself the exact same thing—

“Congratulations.”

Her *Highness*, Princess Negative, had told them.

After winning Oto the Cured from Zanki Kiguchi, Twelfth Master of the Heartland School, at Shogi Village in Tendo, in Dewa, Togame the Schemer had returned to Owari, having been there just a month before in August,¹³ and yet again she had been summoned, along with her trusty sword, to Mansion Negative, the residence of Princess Negative, Inspector General of the Yanari

Shogunate.

While being mortal enemies gave them a certain intimacy, the Grand Commander of Arms and the Inspector General had essentially no good reason for convening. As a result, Togame was not technically obliged to show up if summoned by the Princess—but baited with more information on the Twelve Possessed, she felt the need, in part because of her position in the government, to hear the Princess out.

*In fact, Princess Negative may have engineered these very circumstances—*Togame had told Shichika later on.

The Princess could have been pulling strings since her resurgence—waiting for Togame to come marching home to Owari, once she had gained traction in her Sword Hunt.

Personally, Shichika doubted that the Princess could have pulled strings so effectively, but after all those years of shared antagonism, Togame saw things differently.

Regardless, there they were—

In a chamber of Mansion Negative.

Princess Negative, sitting in the seat of honor.

Togame and Shichika, seated before her.

Like a replay of their last visit in August.

“Your Highness... Is that guy up there in the ceiling?” Shichika inquired.

Starting off with this question, he had ignored her word of praise, but since Togame had apparently done so by design, there was no need for Shichika to take heed.

Coming from Princess Negative, the praise felt like a trap.¹⁴

“That guy? Who exactly do you mean?”

The Princess gave them a look of surprise.

Blond hair and dazzling blue eyes.

But her kimono fit so well that it looked tailor-made.

The metal fan clasped in her hand was, at the moment, closed.

“Do we have some mutual acquaintance I’ve forgotten?”

“...Um, you know, Emonzaemon—the Lieutenant.”

Emonzaemon Soda.

The Non-Ninja—confidant and trusty weapon of Princess Negative.

Playing the same role, Shichika reasoned, that the Kyotoryu is playing for Togame.

“Didn’t you say last time that he’s always up there in the ceiling? I figured that would mean he’s up there now.”

“Ah yes—I know who you mean.” Princess Negative raised her chin and glanced up at the ceiling. “Of course, of course. His name is so long that it’s easy to forget—I appreciate you taking his presence into account, but at the moment, he’s stepped out.”

“Out?”

“If you must know, I’m having him assassinate Hohoh Maniwa,” the Princess told them nonchalantly.

Though Togame had shown no reaction whatsoever to the Princess’s opening word of praise, this statement was too shocking to ignore.

“Did you just say—*assassinate*? Hohoh Maniwa?”

“I sure did.” The Princess nodded briskly. “I understand you and the Maniwa had forged some kind of an alliance—but why should that stop Emonzaemon from operating independently?”

“How could you—” Togame made her displeasure clear. “I have my own plan, thank you very much. I don’t recall asking you to intervene.”

“Hold your horses. I’m not too fond of being yelled at by you, so allow me to explain. That gloomy bemasked dandy¹⁵ has his own personal grudge against the Maniwa.”

Gloomy bemasked dandy...

Harsh words, thought Shichika.

Especially when it was Princess Negative who insisted that Emonzaemon Soda wear the mask (on the dubious premise of him being “gloomy”).

“Personal grudge?” asked Togame. “What would make that gloomy bemasked dandy hold a grudge against the Maniwa?”

Following suit, Togame described Emonzaemon using the same words, but Her Highness showed no sign of having noticed.

“The Aioi Clan,” she proclaimed. “I know that you’re aware of Emonzaemon being a former ninja, but I take it that you’re unaware of the clan to which he once belonged—at this point, I may as well inform you that it was the Aioi Clan. Ever heard of them?”

“...If I’m not mistaken, were they not once hailed as being on par¹⁶ with the Maniwa, sharing their status as outliers from the ninja community? I was under the impression they were wiped out late in the era of the Old Shogun—clashing

with the Maniwa in an epic battle.”

“Brava!”¹⁷

Princess Negative laughed hysterically.

Togame the Schemer and Princess Negative.

Known as the two she-devils of the bakufu, who while holding different offices had a great many things in common—but the starkest difference between them, it now occurred to Shichika, was the well-nigh flippant¹⁸ cheer displayed by Princess Negative in times like these.

“Wow, I must say I’m impressed you knew that—when the Aioi have been essentially erased from history.”

“History Shmistory,”¹⁹ Togame said. “I suppose that makes Emonzaemon Soda the last of the Aioi Clan. Makes sense. That would explain all kinds of things—I might even say that it’s the only possible explanation for a clown like him winding up the way he is...so, am I to understand you’re leveraging his background to avail yourself, Your Highness, of the all-but-lost Aioi Ninpo?”

“Incorrect,” said Princess Negative.

She snapped open her metal fan.

Smiling all the while.

“I could care less about the Aioi or their ninpo—as intriguing as it may sound. I merely wanted to *reject* the blundering existence of that gloomy buffoon.”

“Is that so...”

“What would you have me say? *Make no mistake, I take no pity on Emonzaemon—I’m merely using him to access the Aioi Ninpo—would that satisfy you?*”

While it remained unclear why such a confession would be satisfying, Princess Negative said as much and closed her metal fan.

“At any rate—the Maniwa are Emonzaemon’s bitter rivals.²⁰ This has nothing to do with your Sword Hunt. He really was acting on his own accord.”

“You’re saying that he suddenly decided to pay back a one-hundred-and-seventy-year-old grudge?”

“Now would be as good a time as any—look how weak the Maniwa have become.”

“You didn’t order him to do it?”

“It wasn’t like I didn’t.”

The double negative.

In other words, the Princess must have ordered him.

“So he’s off assassinating Hohoh Maniwa—” Togame said. “Assassinating Hohoh Maniwa... Not like I’d ever expect a straight answer from you, Princess, but let me ask you this. Do you think that’s even possible?”

“Who knows? To be honest, I ordered him to do so back when you were trying to capture Bito the Sundial at Lake Fuyo, meaning he’s been gone for almost two months now. The fact he hasn’t come back yet could mean that he’s been thwarted.”²¹

“Thwarted.”

“Regardless, I’d expect him to have killed off one or two of the Maniwa Ninjas in the process...which reminds me. Here’s another bit of trivia for you. At present, how many of the Twelve Bosses do you suppose there are?”

“Four—right?” answered Togame.

Shichika was under the same impression.

However.

Princess Negative had news for them.

“Three,” she said. “Hohoh Maniwa, Pengin Maniwa, and Oshidori Maniwa—that gloomy bemasked recluse²² of a dandy has taken care of Umigame Maniwa already.”

So now the gloomy bemasked dandy was a recluse, too.

Harsh words.

“Umigame, huh.”

“Hahaha, feeling relieved? I bet you must have wondered how that ninja swordsman would have performed in a fight against Shichika over here.”

“Well—to be honest, Oshidori seems like much more of a threat. Still...hmm. Three left, huh... Regardless of whether he succeeds or fails in his attempt to murder Hohoh Maniwa...”

The Schemer muttered to herself.

No doubt making adjustments to her numerous schemes, in light of this development.

“Even so, Princess. Haven’t you made yourself extremely vulnerable? Entertaining me and my katana, Shichika, without that gloomy recluse of a dandy in the house—”

Togame piggybacked on the new phrasing.²³

Unless Emonzaemon comes home soon, his moniker’s likely to get even worse, Shichika fretted, though it was none of his business.

Well, after all, he could be next.

“Say I was of a mind to murder you right now. How would you defend yourself?”

“I wouldn’t, that’s how—but I strongly doubt that you would ever dare.”

“Hah. It’s an honor to be held in such strong confidence, Princess.”

“Of course. Aren’t you and I friends?”

“...”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m kidding, okay? If you’re planning to murder me, then go ahead, but before you do, you’d better listen to what I have to say.”

“You have something to say?”

“I mean—we both know how much you love information on the Twelve Possessed,” the Princess sneered.

And with that repeated the opening remark they had ignored.

“Which is why I said—congratulations.”

“...”

“You’ve returned to Owari with flying colors, the proud new owner of both Bito the Sundial and Oto the Cured. Well done, well done. At this point—you have captured a whopping nine of the Twelve Possessed.”

Zetto the Leveler from Komori Maniwa.

Zanto the Razor from Uneri Ginkaku.

Sento the Legion from Meisai Tsuruga.

Hakuto the Whisper from Hakuhei Sabi.

Zokuto the Armor from Kanara Azekura.

Soto the Twin from Konayuki Itezora.

Akuto the Eel from Nanami Yasuri.

Bito the Sundial from Skytron.

Oto the Cured from Zanki Kiguchi.

For a running total of nine swords.

Over the span of just nine months, from the beginning of the year, they had captured nine of the Twelve Possessed not even the Old Shogun could obtain—a success that would prompt anyone, Princess Negative or otherwise, to offer their “congratulations.”

However.

Coming from Princess Negative—the comment was suspicious.

Even happy-go-lucky Shichika knew as much.

“Hahaha, at this rate, you’ll have the last three swords in no time!”

“Nonsense—I haven’t asked for your opinion on my job. There’s no way it will be so easy. At present, we have no information whatsoever on the three remaining swords—for the time being, I’ll be devoting all my resources to reconnaissance. And to stay productive, I plan to stick around²⁴ Owari for the foreseeable future.”

“You said the same thing last time—but things got in the way.”

“Huh?”

“By things, of course, I am referring to myself,” the Princess clarified. “And just like last time—I will now give you another hint, making it impossible for you

to stick around Owari. You won't even have a chance to catch your breath."²⁵

"..."

"Last time, I gave you information on Lake Fuyo—which led eventually to your procurement of Bito the Sundial, but this time, I have direct intelligence for you about the Mutant Blade itself."

"Direct intelligence..."

"Pertaining to Seito the Garland," Princess Negative continued unperturbed. "Its owner is Hermit Magus²⁶ Rinne Higaki.²⁷ You'll find the sword at Hyakkeijo in Oshu."

—Ten days had passed since they received this information.

And though it had been somewhat of an exaggeration that the two of them would not have a chance to catch their breath, sure enough Togame the Schemer was unable, yet again, to stick around Owari, practically doubling back and heading off to Hyakkeijo in Oshu—

Which brought them to this empty field.

"Remember how you said it felt like she was pushing us away?" The field was empty, nothing between them and the horizon, but all the same, Shichika made sure the coast was clear when bringing this up with Togame. "Seems like she really is, huh? Could be that there's some reason the Princess doesn't want you to stick around Owari."

"That may well be. Assuming she has some kind of a plan in the works, I can see why I would be unwelcome—but even so, it makes no sense why she would dole out information on the Twelve Possessed. She may have given us the runaround, but she must have known Bito the Sundial was at Lake Fuyo."

“I guess. But only if Seito the Garland really is somewhere in this field, right?”

There was no guarantee.

Scanning this barren landscape, it was easy to suspect this last bit of intelligence on where to find Seito the Garland had been a manic outburst, nothing more.

But the Schemer was certain.

“This is the place,” she said. “I’m sure of it—what reason would she have to lie? Although it almost makes me sick to admit, this goes to show how bizarrely eager both Emonzaemon and that woman are to cooperate with my Sword Hunt.”

“Same goes for Bito the Sundial and Seito the Garland, but how do you think the Princess, being who she is, got ahold of this information?”

“She has connections, that’s for sure. I was certain I had rendered a good many of them inoperative—but it would seem that they have rallied alongside the Princess.”

“Yeah, but still...”

Shichika once again scanned the vicinity.

Desolate.

Thinking it over, that one word said perhaps everything there was to say about this place where so many had been slain—

“It’s like—this place is empty.”

He was referring not only to Hyakkeijo—but to this whole leg of their journey, from the borderlands of Oshu to the land where they now stood.

Empty was an exaggeration.²⁸

That said, the sentiment of this exaggeration was not entirely off base.

The villages were scattered—as were the people.

Far from lively.²⁹

Void of life.³⁰

As if the land itself—had perished.

Withered and rotted, dead to the world.

“...Be careful how you talk about a person’s hometown.”

“Uh, wait, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“The people governing this place were massacred, so what do you expect? It looks like others came in to replace them, but evidently things did not go very well—I mean, I’d heard that things had gone awry, but I had no idea that it was so severe. This is my first time home in twenty years—and I don’t recognize a single thing.”

Made sense.

Unless somebody told you there had been a castle here, you never would have guessed—because every trace had been erased.

The Owari Bakufu premised its reign on peace and order.

Which made the late Rebellion a disgrace.³¹

“...So does that mean the bakufu, in a way, let this place fall apart to make an example of it? Like, a way of showing everyone³² how dumb it was to start a rebellion, by not even trying to rebuild the town?”

“That’s some deep thinking for a guy like you. Though I’d call it a third-rate strategy.”

Careful with her phrasing, neither negating nor agreeing with what Shichika had said, Togame the Schemer began walking—out into the plain.

Not caring whether her brash and brilliant finery was stained.

Mud. Dirt. Plants. Flowers.

Unlike Inaba Desert, which they had visited months before, this place was hardly inorganic—but a feeling that the land itself had died persisted.

Shichika was distraught. He did not remember feeling this sensation in the Level One Disaster Areas of Mt. Odori in Ezo and Lake Fuyo in Edo. Although he knew that he had never seen this place before—

He felt something was missing.

Like he had lost something dear to him—no.

More like something dear to him had been trampled underfoot.

He felt this way—he had not actually lost anything himself, so nothing of his could have been trampled, but just the same. He couldn't imagine how Togame must feel, in her heart of hearts, as she pushed forward through the grass.

The very thought was unimaginable.

The place where she was born and raised...

“This is not exactly the trip home I had anticipated—but here we are.”

“Just making sure, but there's no way the Princess knew this was your hometown when she sent you out here, right? To get you going, I mean.”

“I should think not. If she had learned I am the daughter of Takahito Hida, I would have been killed posthaste. Perhaps this is too complicated for an island boy like you, Shichika, but it's the sort of thing that would result in a summary execution, not some roundabout attempt to rattle me.”

“Hm...guess you’re right. Just feels like too neat a coincidence.”

“Our adversary this time is a hermit magus, after all. Fits the bill.”

He had been afraid to ask her.

Togame had been in a foul mood since her exchange with Princess Negative in Owari, and her foul mood had not been helped by their arrival in Oshu, hence why he was afraid.

Finally, here was his chance to ask.

“Rinne Higaki...right? Why do they call her the hermit magus? And what was up with your reaction when you heard her name? Are you two old acquaintances or—”

“We are not old acquaintances. Every last one of my old acquaintances has been exterminated,” said Togame. “Dead and gone.”

“...”

“I know nothing of this Rinne Higaki—I was merely piqued by the name ‘Rinne.’ To think that anyone today would have a name so foolish—though from a *hermit magus*, what do you expect.”

“Now that’s what I call being roundabout.”

“I am not being roundabout. I know as little as you do about what we’ve gotten ourselves into. This time around, it’s all riding on our information from the Princess—which means we need to hoof it³³ through the fields and track Higaki down ourselves.”

“Look, I know this isn’t as bad as Lake Fuyo, but from the looks of it there’s no one living here. I suppose Higaki could live in a nearby village—but even the closest one is pretty far! The villages here are so spread out... I guess we could

check every single one we come across?”³⁴

“Not a bad idea. *But if what the Princess said to us is true—and Rinne Higaki is a bona fide*³⁵ *hermit magus...*”

Then.

Suddenly.

The very moment Togame spoke these words.

Literally, that very instant—they felt something *appear*.

Behind them? No.

In front of them.

There she was—right in front of Togame and Shichika.

Like she had been there all along—though where could she have hidden, in a field like this?

Slight in stature, looking half as tall as Shichika.

Long black hair tied back at her neck.

Impeccable posture—

“Huh?”

Shichika was confused.

“What’s this girl doing here?”

In response.

The girl smiled an ironic smile, far from girlish—

“Hah. So that’s how I appear to you?”

Without further ado, she introduced herself.

“I haven’t been a girl in quite some time—though I may as well enjoy it. Nice to meet you. I’m Rinne Higaki—a pleasure to make your acquaintance, I guess?”

¹ お膝元 OHIZAMOTO “at the knee”

² 百刑場 HYAKKEIJŌ “locus of a hundred executions”

³ おこがましい OKOGAMASHII going too far ⁴ 消し炭 KESHIZUMI “extinguished coal”

⁵ おどろおどろしい ODORO ODORO SHII gaudily unsettling ⁶ 立役者 TATEYAKUSHA leading actor ⁷ 出世を目論む SHUSSE WO MOKUROMU seeking to be promoted ⁸ 色濃く集約 IROKOKU SHŪYAKU “abridged in thick color”

⁹ 討った UTTA felled, defeated, killed ¹⁰ 誠刀 銓 SEITŌ HAKARI “The Sincere Katana: Balance”

¹¹ 追い返す OIKAESU repel

¹² 疑問 GIMON question; source of doubt ¹³ 葉月 HAZUKI “month of leaves” eighth month of the Japanese calendar ¹⁴ わざとらしい WAZATORASHII laden with ulterior motives ¹⁵ 根暗仮面男 NEKURA KAMEN OTOKO “Morose Mask-Man”

¹⁶ 双璧 SŌHEKI “twin jewels”

¹⁷ さすが過ぎる SASUGA SUGIRU “you have outdone yourself”

¹⁸ 投げやり NAGEYARI negligent, irresponsible ¹⁹ 歴史、ね[...]くだらぬ REKISHI, NE[...]KUDARANU “History? Trifling/Tedious”

²⁰ 怨敵 ONTEKI “hated enemy”

²¹ 返り討ち KAERI UCHI seek revenge and lose ²² 引きこもり HIKIKOMORI
shut-in; a journalistic/sociological buzzword and deliberate anachronism ²³
呼び方に便乗 YOBIKATA NI BINJŌ “hitch a ride on the manner of address”

²⁴ 腰を落ち着ける KOSHI WO OCHITSUKERU “settle down one’s hips”

²⁵ 腰を下ろす KOSHI WO OROSU “lower one’s hips”

²⁶ 仙人 SEN’NIN mystic; usually an old man with special powers living on
a 山 YAMA mountain ²⁷ 彼我木輪廻 HIGAKI RIN’NE 彼我 HIGA other and
own (sides, in contrast) 輪廻 RIN’NE transmigration ²⁸ 言い過ぎ IISUGI
“saying too much”

²⁹ 活気 KAKKI “active spirit” (commercial) vitality ³⁰ 生気 SEIKI “raw
spirit” human activity ³¹ 失態 SHITTAI “loss of attitude” (embarrassing)
mistake ³² 国民 KOKUMIN the people of a nation ³³ 足を使って ASHI WO
TSUKATTE using our feet ³⁴ 手当たり次第に TE ATARI SHIDAI NI “as they
touch the hands”

³⁵ 偽りなく ITSUWARI NAKU without falsehood; free of deception



CHAPTER THREE

PENGIN
MANIWA



The Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa.

Three bosses in the Bird Unit—

“The Divine Phoenix”—Hohoh Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Life Line and Decapitation Cycle.

Alive and well.

The owner of Dokuto the Basilisk, one of the Twelve Possessed, the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki.

“The Feathered Reel”—Oshidori Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Thorough Thrashing.

Now dead.

Cut down in the ninth moon, at Izu, fighting Emonzaemon Soda.

“Backwords Shirasagi”—Shirasagi Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Flapjack-Flipping.

Now dead.

Cut down in the second moon, in Inaba Desert, fighting Ginkaku Uneri.

Three bosses in the Beast Unit—

“The Dogged Scourge”—Kyoken Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Foaming Mouth.

Now dead.

Cut down in the sixth moon, in Ezo, fighting Shichika Yasuri.

“Komori the Hell-Made”—Komori Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Star Cannon and Body Melt.

Now dead.

Cut down in the first moon, on Haphazard Island, fighting Shichika Yasuri.

“The Nosey Otter”—Kawauso Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Infovac.

Now dead.

Cut down in the sixth moon, in Ezo, by the hand of his comrade, in the line of duty.¹

Three bosses in the Bug Unit—

“Kamakiri the Head Hunter”—Kamakiri Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Mantis Talons.

Cut down in the fourth moon, on Haphazard Island, fighting Nanami Yasuri.

“Flying Butter Chocho”—Chocho Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Harlequin Butterfly.

Now dead.

Cut down in the fourth moon, on Haphazard Island, fighting Nanami Yasuri.

“Mitsubachi the Sharpshooter”—Mitsubachi Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Blunderbuzz.

Now dead.

Cut down in the fourth moon, on Haphazard Island, fighting Nanami Yasuri.

Three bosses in the Fish Unit—

“The Immortal Turtle”—Umigame Maniwa.

—No ninpo.

Now dead.

Cut down in the eighth moon, at Shinano, fighting Emonzaemon Soda.

“Kuizame the Sand Trap”—Kuizame Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Dust Devil.

Now dead.

Cut down in the third moon, in Izumo, fighting Meisai Tsuruga.

“Penguin the Breeder”—Penguin Maniwa.

Wielding the ninpo—Fate Blaster and Lucky Pucks.

Alive and well.

Working in concert with Hohoh Maniwa—



“Seeing as she’s taken this long to come back—I reckon Oshidori has been slain.”

Hohoh Maniwa made this announcement without altering the speed at which he walked along the highway.² Penguin Maniwa, walking beside him, shivered at the very mention of it.

“Huh? O-O-O-Oshidori—”

“Afraid so,” stated Hohoh. “Which means the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa have been reduced to only two.”

The self-derision in his tone of voice was palpable.

Hohoh Maniwa, effectively the head of the Twelve Bosses, the rest of whom were crackpots,³ was among the few of them possessing any sociability—and as a result, he must have been quite bothered by these tragic excesses and excessive tragedy.

However—as the leader of the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

He was not about to speak abjectly of their circumstances.

“O-Only two...”

Penguin Maniwa, weak in the knees.

In stark contrast to Hohoh.

Out of all of the Twelve Bosses, nay, in all of Maniwa Village, he was the youngest to partake in battle—indeed, Penguin was just a boy.

But even in light of his young age, his weak nerves were anomalous.





He had the sort of personality that would not normally befit a ninja, much less a boss.

However, the fact that he not only partook in battle, but had been granted the elite rank of ninja boss, could be attributed to his ninpo, the Fate Blaster, which was truly out of hand—a fearsome ninpo, too much to handle for even Hohoh Maniwa, effectively the leader of the entire ninja clan.

Whether he liked it or not.

This was the ninpo that Penguin Maniwa had been bestowed.

From on high, or perhaps from somewhere else.

“Wh-Wh-What should we do, Hohoh? What do we do now—”

“What can be done? Not like we can rework our entire plan, on account of losing Oshidori—the two of us will have to head for Oshu.”

So it was.

At that moment—Hohoh and Penguin were on their way to Oshu.

Specifically, to Hyakkeijo.

The very place where Togame and Shichika sojourned, hoping to track down Seito the Garland—and obviously, not by coincidence.

Hohoh setting his sights on this place—to stop Togame the Schemer, once and for all.⁴

“Th-The Schemer has already gathered nine of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki...wh-which means she has expended all the information that you gave her, when the two of you forged your alliance in Satsuma in May. B-But that doesn’t explain why she would go to Oshu. In-Indeed, if you’re of a mind to renegotiate, now is the time...but Hohoh.”

“Enough. Say no more.” Hohoh shook his head. “Your stance is clear. I still believe that we’d be better off withholding our negotiations until the Schemer has obtained another one or two of the Twelve Possessed—and if we could afford to be choosy, we would wait until she has eleven, considering how our ranks have dwindled.”

With that.

Hohoh glanced down at the waist of his ninja garb—at the sword he carried in a motley scabbard.

One of the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki.

Venom stronger than any of the Twelve Possessed—despotically toxic.

Dokuto the Basilisk.

“Negotiating once she has captured the eleven other swords would be most opportune for us—but we no longer have the time for that. Not since that man appeared—”

“Th-That man...”

The man who ambushed their clandestine summit with Oshidori—

Coat and trousers, a pair of swords slung from his hips.

Wearing a mask, on which was scrawled the word “NON-NINJA.”

Acting fast, Oshidori had distracted him for long enough to let the two of them escape—but if Hohoh saw things as they were, she had sacrificed her life in the process.

A characteristic exit⁵ for a ninja.

Albeit out of character for a Maniwa.

And yet—in character for Oshidori.

But at this point, Hohoh's guess was as good as Penguin's.

“Wh-What was his name again...so many details unconfirmed...he doesn't own one of the Twelve Possessed. He isn't working for the Schemer—well, what is he?”

“If you rule out those two possibilities, only one remains,” said Hohoh. “You surprise me, Penguin—can't you see? He must be working under Princess Negative, who's been reinstituted.”

“Princess Negative...b-but I haven't heard a thing about her having somebody like him at her command... If she did, I wish the Schemer would have told us when we helped her take down the Princess.”

“That only goes to show the Schemer never trusted us at all. Not even Komori. She may have hired him as her first helper in the Sword Hunt, but she refused to divulge even the slightest matter of importance—”

Hohoh gazed off into the distance.

“—Which frankly puzzles me. When we met the Schemer in Satsuma in May, and again in Ezo in June, she acted like she trusted the Kyotoryu immensely. Of course, that could have been an act like so much else.”

“...I don't see her as the kind of lady who would develop a soft spot, just because the two of them made a trip together.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.”

“Af-After the Sword Hunt is over and the Kyotoryu has served his purpose, he'll be cast aside, just like the Maniwa.”

It was unlike Penguin to say such a thing.

He sounded totally disgusted.

“You don’t suppose she could have—lost her way.”

“On the contrary, perhaps a way is what she’s found. Regardless, we can expect to find out once we have the pleasure of reuniting with⁶ her in Oshu—but I digress. Back to the Princess. It would seem that woman operates according to a different set of standards⁷ from the Schemer. Unless I’m careful, I’ll be the next to lose my neck—in which case, you’d be the only one left, Penguin. Are you prepared to negotiate with the Schemer, on behalf of the entire ninja village?”

“N-Not one bit.”

This straight answer made Hohoh smile ruefully.⁸

“This would be a decent time to lie—though I suppose that’s perhaps too much to ask.”

“...Hohoh.”

Timidly—or even timorously,⁹ Penguin asked a question.

“Am I correct...that you might have a sense of who this man is after all?”

“What? It’s like I said just now. He’s working for the Princess. That’s my guess.”

“Not who he’s working for...but where he came from. Listening to you talk about him, I get the feeling that you’ve known each other for a long time—”

“Sharp as ever, Penguin.” Hohoh grinned. “You truly stand apart.”

“P-Please, you’re flattering me.”

“I’m not flattering you. I’m lamenting the state of our village, in such sorry shape that we have forced you into battle before you’re ready, without giving

you a chance to cultivate the genius that is your gift—hah. But I digress again. It would be going too far to say I have a sense of who he is. It's no more than a hunch, hardly worth mentioning—I'm probably mistaken."

"Mistaken?"

"Indeed. *There is no way that man is still alive*—and he would certainly not deign to work under Princess Negative. He's much too proud. The sort of man who would not work for someone else even if he lost both of his arms. He was that kind of a ninja..."

Hohoh paused.

"This was long before your time."

"N-Ninja? D-Does that make him a friend of yours?"

"Like I said, it can't be him. That man is dead and gone—in our age, there are no proud ninjas left. Which applies to us as well—"

"..."

"Well then, let's make some progress¹⁰—that bemasked gentleman,¹¹ not being an old friend of ours, will likely try another ambush."

"Puh...Perhaps."

"If we succeed in our negotiations with the Schemer, and thus obtain all of the Twelve Possessed—I think it's about time that I stepped down. It's up to me to take responsibility for the ten bosses that we've lost. To let¹² the next generation call the shots."

"Y-You're kidding," Penguin said.

"I kid you not," asserted Hohoh. "This is serious. Down the line, you're the only ninja who could take over for me. At the end of the day, the Maniwa are

relics of another era. Same as the Schemer and the Kyotoryu and Princess Negative—and even the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki. All relics of another time, the detritus¹³ of history. Especially that old friend of mine, whose time came over ten years ago—”



Relics of another time, the detritus of history.

The man cited as the cardinal example of this was—contrary to Hohoh’s expectations, *or perhaps in line with them*, Princess Negative’s henchman, Emonzaemon Soda.

But at present, Emonzaemon Soda—though having been directed to assassinate Hohoh Maniwa, was biding his time in Owari, at Mansion Negative. Hohoh and Penguin may have feared another ambush from Emonzaemon as they made their way to Oshu—but in reality, there was no cause for concern.

After taking down Oshidori Maniwa, Emonzaemon had tracked Hohoh’s progress, committed to his assassination, but before long, upon hearing that Togame the Schemer had safely captured Oto the Cured, he repaired to Owari.

Hence.

During that second conference between Togame and the Princess—

The Lieutenant had been hiding in the ceiling after all. If the Schemer had been so impolitic as to sic¹⁴ Shichika on her then and there, Emonzaemon

would have stepped up, or hopped down, and battled Shichika, which regardless of the outcome would have spelled the end of Togame's political career.

It was a cruel trick—Princess Negative at her best.

Though for the most part, she was only trying to amuse herself, not actually hoping to waylay the Schemer. The plot amounted to little more than mischief—all the same.

Princess Negative.

Standing alone in Mansion Negative—in the middle of the room.

Poised, though not for action.

Looked toward the ceiling.

“By now, do you suppose that nasty woman—has met up with Rinne Higaki?” she asked. “Seito the Garland would mark their tenth conquest of the Twelve Possessed, and compared to all the others, this one should be quite easy—to be sure, Oto the Cured and Seito the Garland will likely prove to be the easiest Mutant Blades to capture. The trouble is the owners—which for Oto the Cured meant Zanki Kiguchi, and for the Garland means Rinne Higaki.”

“Hermit Magus.”

A voice came from the ceiling.

The voice, of course, belonging to Emonzaemon.

That man who would sooner die than answer to another—

Was answering to Princess Negative, from behind the ceiling.

“Your Highness—I'm surprised that you entrusted Rinne Higaki, of all people, with one of the Twelve Possessed. I suppose this is another of the tricks you're

always playing on the Schemer?”

“Make no mistake, I did not entrust it with Rinne Higaki—what would possess me to toss a hermit magus a priceless¹⁵ Mutant Blade? I’ll have you know I’m not too keen on her being the owner.”

“Priceless Mutant Blade, indeed—”

“Look, this isn’t just about the Garland. Most of the swords have been held by individuals who posed a nuisance to me. Which is perhaps what makes me so prepared to shower that nasty woman with praises, after rounding up so many of the Twelve Possessed I failed to capture.”

“I know I’ve given my report already, but please allow me to reiterate,” Emonzaemon said softly. “Hohoh Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa and effectively the leader of the ninja clan—has obtained Dokuto the Basilisk, whose venom is stronger than any of the Twelve Possessed.”

“Heard you the first time.” Princess Negative grinned and nodded. “The same Hohoh Maniwa that you failed to assassinate—right?”

“I have no excuse.”

“It’s fine. At the very least, the Maniwa have been distracted for a time—but I have to wonder. My plan did not originally include a scene¹⁶ in which the Maniwa get their hands on yet another of the Twelve Possessed—especially not Dokuto the Basilisk. *But since when has anything gone according to plan?* I’d rather not imagine Hohoh with a Mutant Blade. After my failure to foresee the betrayal of the Sword Saint, Hakuhei Sabi, and the advent of that monster of a genius, Nanami Yasuri, I assumed the worst of my miscalculations¹⁷ were behind me...but it would seem that I’ve made yet another blunder.¹⁸ I cannot claim to fathom—whether the union of Hohoh Maniwa and Dokuto the Basilisk

will prove bad luck, or the worst luck possible.”¹⁹

“There’s Dokuto the Basilisk, in the hands of Hohoh Maniwa. And after that there’s our sword—Ento the Bead.”

“Yes. With the help of which you took down Oshidori Maniwa. Well. I haven’t fired the thing myself, but it has turned out to be a very useful weapon. Unbelievable.”

“Should the Schemer be successful in capturing Seito the Garland—all twelve of the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki will finally share the stage.”

“All twelve...”

Zetto the Leveler. Zanto the Razor. Sento the Legion.

Hakuto the Whisper. Zokuto the Armor. Soto the Twin.

Akuto the Eel. Bito the Sundial. Oto the Cured.

Seito the Garland. Dokuto the Basilisk. Ento the Bead.

Masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki—the Twelve Possessed.

“Indeed. Exactly. Like you say, the time is *finally* upon us—although it took us quite a while to get here.”

“Which means your cherished dream has nearly met fruition—”

“Whoa, whoa. The walls have ears just as the paper doors have eyes. How can we be certain someone isn’t eavesdropping? Quit speaking so carelessly, Emonzaemon—you almost make it sound like I’m the direct descendant of the legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki, who reigned over the Age of Warring States, and that’s why I know all about the Twelve Possessed, allowing me to always stay a step ahead of that nasty woman.”

Thus spoke Princess Negative.

She snapped open her metal fan—and laughed derisively.

“None of that is true, of course, so please refrain from saying so.”

“...Certainly.” Emonzaemon nodded behind the ceiling. “Your Highness has no relation whatsoever to Kiki Shikizaki. Please forgive me if my remark was misleading.”

“This is why they call me Princess Negative—for I reject all other aspects of myself entirely. I have no history or ancestry—okay? I even reject my cherished dreams, whether they bear fruit or otherwise.”

“...”

“That said, don’t think that I like twiddling my thumbs²⁰ while the Maniwa meet their goals and the Schemer realizes her ambitions. Seito the Garland and Rinne Higaki ought to hold them off a while longer. The Schemer and the Kyotoryu will surely stop once they reach the land of Oh.²¹ Until then, I will continue preparations here, as best I can. Ideally—the Schemer and the Kyotoryu will drub out²² the last two of the Maniwa for me. They’re bound to make a move against the Schemer any day now.”

“Inevitably. They are ninjas, after all.”

“That argument has weight,²³ coming from you, truly. However—we must keep our eyes on the prize. I hate to ask you this, Emonzaemon, but would you go after the Maniwa again for me?”

“You mean—assassinate them?”

“No, but now that Hohoh Maniwa has Dokuto the Basilisk, those scenes will need to be rewritten yet again. We wouldn’t want to startle him...depending on the circumstances. I suppose, at the end of the day, he’ll have to die

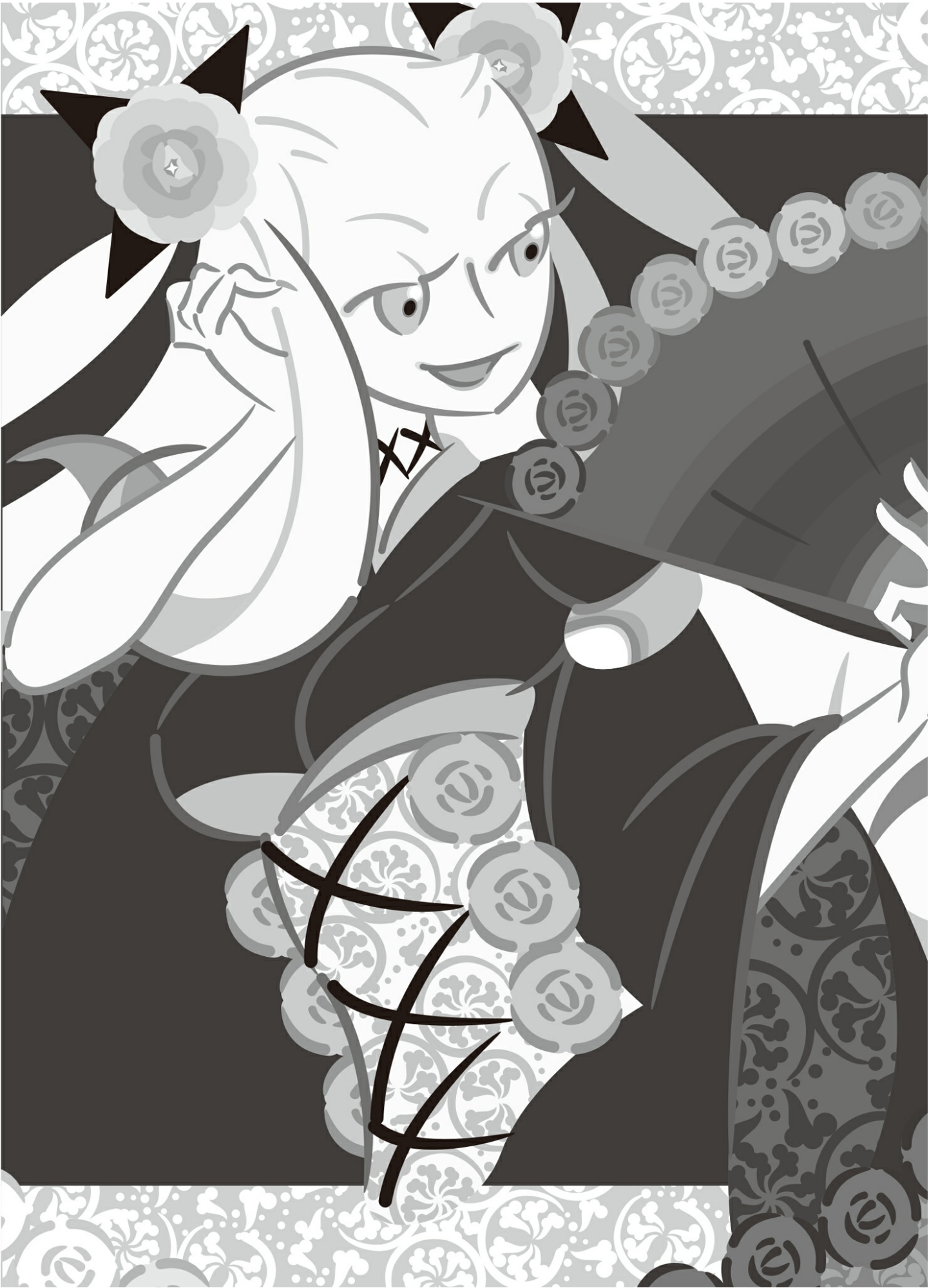
regardless—”

“What about the other boss?”

“Hm? What was his name again?”

“Pengin Maniwa.”

“Ah yes...I’ll leave him up to you. I don’t know anything about him, but at this point what’s another middling boss, dead or alive? Anyway, if the Maniwa are planning to confront the Schemer, the odds are high they’re heading for Hyakkeijo in Oshu. Alright, catch up with them before they have a chance to make a move.”





“Will do.”

“Hold on.”

Princess Negative had something else to tell her henchman in the ceiling.

“Entirely unrelated, something else is bothering me—you can take care of this afterwards, but I’d like for you to look into it personally.”²⁴

“Huh? What is it?”

“It happened when the Schemer and the Kyotoryu were visiting these chambers. When Shichika heard me tell them where to find Seito the Garland, the strangest look came over him.”

The whereabouts of Seito the Garland.

Hyakkeijo in Oshu.

The former site of Hida Castle—once home to Takahito Hida, Mastermind of the Rebellion and Kaoyaku of Oshu.

“Perhaps you couldn’t tell behind the ceiling? He didn’t seem to react to ‘Rinne Higaki’ or ‘Hermit Magus,’ but either ‘Hyakkeijo’ or ‘Oshu’ tripped him up—regardless, he started acting strangely after that.”

“...How about the Schemer?”

“No, she was the same nasty woman as always—though perhaps I’m imagining things.”

“I can’t say...I noticed anything strange about the Kyotoryu.”

“No?”

“Do you mean—he seemed perturbed?”²⁵

“Not so much perturbed, as *pretending not to be perturbed*—Shichika spent

what, like twenty years marooned on Haphazard Island? This has to be his first time visiting Oshu.”

“His father, Mutsue Yasuri, was Hero of the Rebellion—is there a chance he simply recognized the name from stories he heard as a child?”

“Sure, but none of that explains why that nasty woman hasn’t visited Oshu before—how is that possible? Unlike me, her work takes her all over the nation... How come she hasn’t made it once to Oshu? Wouldn’t you say that it’s among the places that the Grand Commander of Arms should be familiar with?”

“It’s more than possible. I’m sure that Oshu is by no means the only place the Schemer hasn’t visited. It just so happens to be on the list of places that she hasn’t been—regardless of whether going would behoove her.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Nevertheless,” the Princess firmly stated, “I have no choice but to reject such a bland²⁶ interpretation—sending you on a fool’s errand isn’t such a bad idea, as far as plots go, anyway. Well, then. Go figure out whatever link there is between Shichika Yasuri and Hyakkeijo—or between *Togame the Schemer and Hyakkeijo*. I’ll be waiting.”



And so our story heads toward the finale.²⁷

The two she-devils of the Owari Bakufu.

Real names and origins unknown.

Princess Negative and the Schemer.

Whose showdown—was not so many days away.

¹ 殉職 JUNSHOKU “professional martyrdom”

² 街道 KAIDŌ “avenue road” major route ³ 性格破綻者 SEIKAKU
HATANSHA “broken personalities”

⁴ 三度あいまみえん MITABI AI MAMIEN “there will be no third
confrontation”

⁵ 最期 SAIGO final (moments); end of life ⁶ まみえた MAMIETA having
seen in person formal or, in this case, ironic and dismissive ⁷ 規約 KIYAKU
terms of use; rules ⁸ 苦笑 KUSHŌ “bitter smile”

⁹ おずおずと おどおどと OZU OZU TO ODO ODO TO onomatopoeia for
skittishness, anxiousness ¹⁰ 道行 MICHİYUKI travel scene in traditional
Japanese theater ¹¹ 洋装仮面 YŌSŌ KAMEN “Western-Clothes Mask”

¹² 託す TAKUSU entrust

¹³ 遺物 異物 IBUTSU IBUTSU “bequeathed object” remains “foreign
object” contaminant ¹⁴ けしかけていたら KESHI KAKETE ITARA had (she)
loosed upon, ordered to attack ¹⁵ 大事 DAIJI “big deal” important ¹⁶ 台本
DAIHON scripted story ¹⁷ 計算違い KEISAN CHIGAI “erroneous
computation”

¹⁸ 手違い TE CHIGAI “wrong hand”

¹⁹ 凶 大凶 KYŌ DAIKYŌ misfortune great misfortune ²⁰ 指をくわえて YUBI
WO KUWAETE “with a finger in one’s mouth”

²¹ 奥羽 ŌU historic region comprising Mutsu (home to 奥州 ŌSHŪ Oshu) and Dewa ²² 打破 DAHA “hit-break”

²³ 説得力 SETTOKU RYOKU “power to persuade”

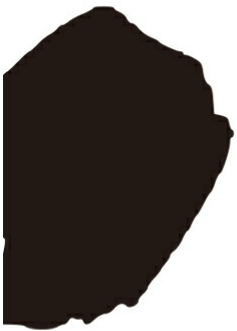
²⁴ 直々に JIKIJIKI NI directly ²⁵ 動揺 DŌYŌ shaken

²⁶ 普通 FUTSŪ normal

²⁷ 終局 SHŪKYOKU close, conclusion

CHAPTER FOUR

RINNE
HIGAKI



■ ■

“Huh? You’re saying you guys want Seito the Garland? Ah, alright. You can have it. It’s yours. Go ahead and take it.”

Slight in stature, looking half as tall as Shichika.

Long black hair tied back at her neck.

A girl with perfect posture.

Rinne Higaki—said they could have it.

■ ■

Hyakkeijo, in Oshu.

The place where those who joined¹ the rebel army, and those who had not joined but were connected to the ones who had, as well as those who merely were suspected of doing so, were mercilessly executed—in sanctioned genocide.²

The place where once there stood the brash and brilliant grandiosity³ of Hida

Castle, where the leader of the rebel army, Takahito Hida, resided with his family—though it had long since been reduced to ash.

Hyakkeijo.

Three days had passed since Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, visited the site alongside Togame the Schemer—

And there the two remained.

Nothing to be done.

This girl, Rinne Higaki, sitting before them on a little boulder, could not possibly have been too comfortable.

In one hand—Higaki held a carafe of sake.

From which she drank without a cup.

—*Strange*.

*Déjà vu*⁴—thought Shichika.

Noticing the concerned face he was making, Higaki tilted her neck quizzically.

“What’s up, Yasuri?” she asked. “You seem bored.”⁵

“Bored... I mean, yeah, I am bored.”

He really was.

Togame was perhaps another story—but Shichika was bored out of his skull.

“Wait, though...Higaki. All that aside, I gotta ask you—”

“Oh, I know—don’t even bother finishing. You’re wondering what’s up with me. What’s the story with this Rinne Higaki character?”

Higaki said this with a grin.

“Hate to break it to you—but the details of my backstory have nothing to do with you. *Backstory*...such an impersonal⁶ word. The story behind your back⁷... what’s that supposed to mean? Right, Yasuri? My existence, properly speaking, is of no use to you—for that matter, to either of you. The only thing that you—or either of you care about is the Mutant Blade of Kiki Shikizaki that I have. You’re here for Seito the Garland. Yes?”

“...Well, yeah,” admitted Shichika. “But this time around, Togame is taking care of *all of that*—forcing me to sit here with my thoughts. Togame brought this up last month—thinking is easy, but not thinking is evidently something that not everyone can handle. Which is why an ordinary guy like me is stuck here with my thoughts.”

“Really. What’s on your mind?”

Higaki wore an impudent⁸ expression.

An unlikely expression for a girl—but even from that face she made.

Shichika got déjà vu.

Indeed, almost as if—

“Hey, Higaki, I know you said that it was nice to meet me—”

Shichika spoke frankly, not mincing words.

“But have we met somewhere before?”

“Nope.”

For three days.

From the moment Higaki miraculously appeared in the field before them, and ever since, this thought had stayed with Shichika—at long last he had summoned the resolve to ask her, but Higaki shot him down like it was nothing, rejecting

the idea outright.

“Remember, I’m a hermit magus—I basically keep my distance from the world. And by keep my distance, I mean cut myself off, severing all ties and connections—I’m what you might call ‘free-floating.’⁹ Which means the odds that you and I have met at some earlier date are less than zero. No chance we even passed each other on the wayside without knowing.”

“Y-Yeah, but—”

Déjà vu.

This feeling had been with Shichika since they met.

Like reuniting—with someone from his past.

And by no stretch of the imagination was this reunion happy—

“I know you from somewhere—I think,” Shichika said.

Despite his hasty qualification.

The first part of the statement had the stubborn nature of a fact.

“I’m pretty sure we’ve met somewhere before.”

“Listen, Yasuri. Your eyes are playing tricks on you.”

Higaki struck an inciting¹⁰ tone—

Suggesting insight¹¹ on the situation.

Perhaps such insight should not come as a surprise, since after all she had declared herself to be a hermit magus.

“Yeah, I mean...I figured it was déjà vu—”

“Déjà vu? Whoa. You know some fancy words—but you’re wrong, Yasuri. If this déjà vu you speak of involves some kind of mental misperception, where

something that you're sure you've never done starts feeling like you've done it once before—then this eerie feeling that you have about me is not déjà vu after all.”

An eerie feeling, but not déjà vu.

Higaki spoke like this was overwhelmingly self-evident, at least to her.

“I am a legitimate perception—based on your legitimate memories.”

“Legit...”

“Yes. Unequivocally.¹² Keheheh!”

Higaki laughed out loud.

What a weird laugh, thought Shichika.

Almost like someone—who knew not how to laugh, but laughed like crazy all the same.

“Remember what I said when we first met? ‘So that’s how I appear to you?’—please, remind me. How exactly do I appear to you?”

“...You look like a girl.”

Though her personality be far from girlish.

“A girl, with black hair. And also—somehow, as you sit there chugging sake, looking aloof, your posture is weirdly perfect. Something in the way you hold yourself feels too familiar, like I’ve seen it somewhere else before—”

“Sure you have,” acknowledged Higaki. “I’m a projection of your memory.”

“...”

“The fact that I appear that way means only that, in your specific case, I happen to embody that kind of a person—get it, Yasuri?”

This girl who called herself a hermit magus.

Rinne Higaki—gave Shichika an unpleasant sidelong glance.¹³

“I am a hermit magus.”

“Hermit magus...”

“I am both everyone and no one.”

She made these otherworldly, fantastical statements—sound matter of fact.

“Through me, people can gaze into their memories—hence what makes me a *hermit* magus. However present, I am not of this world.”

“My memories...”

“Well now, do you remember? Does any of this jog your memory? Can you pinpoint the experience—the moment when you saw me, as you see me now, creating this perception?”

“Ah.”

As a matter of fact—after so much coaxing.

Shichika—saw the light.¹⁴

Of course—it was the sort of thing he should have realized without having things spelled out for him so plainly.

He hardly needed a reminder.

Rinne Higaki.

This figure of a girl.

For Shichika, the memory was unforgettable.

He couldn't help recalling Konayuki Itezora—whom he had met in Ezo, on Mt.

Odori.

That clan of monstrous strength.

A family of monstrous strength unparalleled.

That naive and innocent girl, who gave Shichika the first X on his scorecard.

Owner of Soto the Twin, the heaviest sword in existence.

Konayuki Itezora.

But that black hair—and that hairstyle.

He needed no reminder.

He should have noticed this the second that he saw her—from its color to the way she tied it back, this was unmistakably the hair of Nanami Yasuri, his older sister.

Owner of Akuto the Eel, the most wicked sword in all the land.

Nanami Yasuri.

In which case—that thoroughly¹⁵ perfect posture, which made such a strong impression, must have come from the Twelfth Master of the Heartland School, Zanki Kiguchi, whom he battled just last month.

The owner of Oto the Cured, that sword following the most righteous of all paths.

Zanki Kiguchi.

“ ... ”

Konayuki Itezora.

Nanami Yasuri.

Zanki Kiguchi.

What these three shared was all too clear.

The greatest common factor being painfully apparent.

All three of them—though doing so in their own way, had defeated Shichika.

“I said that you could gaze into your memory,” said Higaki. “In other words, I am a manifestation of your failings¹⁶—when people recall how they acted in the past, they tend to make convenient changes to the details. But not when you observe the past through me. From the look on your face, it would appear I’m helping you relive some not-so-pleasant memories...”

This reunion—being anything but happy.

After all.

Though it may come in many forms, no memory could be more bitter, for a creature of the battlefield¹⁷ like Shichika, than defeat.

Nay, this troubled him not only as a warrior.

To Shichika—defeat was tantamount to an act of insubordination towards his owner, Togame the Schemer.

“Makes sense.”

Come to think of it, this even explained the eerily familiar way Higaki drank her sake.

Guzzling it down with abandon.

It had to be a projection of the owner of Sento the Legion, Meisai Tsuruga, whom he had fought at Triad Shrine in Izumo.

Meisai Tsuruga.

Strictly speaking, Meisai had not defeated Shichika—though looking back on it, his memory of the experience was extremely bitter.

Just shy of—perhaps even surpassing the other three.

Bitter.

As well as painful.

“In that case—it makes total sense why I would feel so crummy, when I’m only standing here across from you. Seeing you triggers awful memories.”

“Not so much awful memories as regrets. I might even call it guilt—but for the record, understand that I’m not forcing you to do this. I’m not doing anything at all—you’re projecting all of this onto me, on your own.”

“Really? Uh, you mean...you’re not using some kind of hermit magic?”¹⁸

“Nope. And I couldn’t if I tried,” Higaki overshared.¹⁹ “Stop treating me like I’m human. I’m a hermit magus, don’t you forget it.”

“But...”

What about eternal life and youth?

What about ethereal powers?²⁰

What about flying through the sky—the term “hermit magus” conjured all kinds of mystical abilities defying reason.²¹

Known collectively as hermit magic.

Togame the Schemer and Princess Negative in Owari—had both mentioned as much.

However.

“This is yet another way you people have projected your experience on me...

on us. Eternal life and youth? Ethereal powers? Flying through the sky? Nothing more than broken dreams—which translate into personal failings. What is a hermit—if not a mirror into the soul?”

“Mirror?”

“A magical mirror, made to display the truth. Hey, Yasuri. Do you know a fairy tale from overseas that goes like this? Once upon a time there lived a queen—and this queen asks her mirror a question. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all? The queen is hoping that the answer would be her, but the mirror gives a different name, the name of someone who the queen absolutely despises... What do you think of that, Yasuri? You think a mirror can tell you that sort of thing?”

“Hard to say—mirrors can’t talk.”

“Exactly. The answer wasn’t coming from the mirror—it was no more than the queen’s inmost self²² responding to her vanity. That’s how it works. Standing before me, Rinne Higaki, nobody is able to look away.”

“But it’s not like I hate Konayuki, or sis, or Kiguchi, or Meisai. Not at all.”

“Konayuki? Sis? Kiguchi? Meisai? Are you referring to the manifestation of your failings, having risen to the surface where you can view it plainly?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know—you’re basically a composite of the four of them.”

“I’m not acting. I really don’t know. I have no way of knowing how I look to you—I may be a projection of your memories, but that doesn’t mean that I can read them. Telepathy is for mortals—I am a hermit magus, far beyond the mortal realm.”

“For a hermit magus...you sure seem short on superpowers.”

Everything—was in the eye of the beholder.

Her form and her comportment.

All a matter of how Shichika perceived them—Higaki was doing nothing.

“Exactly. I’m doing nothing. Not a thing. And that’s what makes me a hermit magus, Yasuri. You humans are the ones who feel the need to do things, to mess with²³ things—I’m still a rookie,²⁴ far as hermit magi go. I haven’t lived for such a very long time, you see. But one of the few things I’m proud of is that I’ve done absolutely nothing my whole life.”

“How old are you, anyway?”

From the looks of it, she was maybe ten years old.

But even this was all about *how she appeared to Shichika*—irrelevant to the actual appearance of Rinne Higaki.

Indeed.

Rinne Higaki had no actual appearance.

She was a hermit magus.

No backstory—no story behind her back.

“About three hundred. Or I guess three hundred and fifty, counting my time as a human,” Higaki answered nonchalantly.

But then.

She never spoke with any kind of gravitas.

Hence every statement sounded casual.

“Then at some point—however many years ago, I received Seito the Garland from Kiki Shikizaki, the man himself, and became its owner.”

“Is it really fair to call yourself the owner of Seito the Garland?” Shichika took issue with Higaki’s choice of words. “I’m amazed to hear that you received it from the man himself—but if you’re the owner of the Garland, why aren’t you carrying it?”²⁵

Rinne Higaki, perched atop her boulder.

Armed neither with Seito the Garland—nor with any other kind of weapon.

Completely emptyhanded.

Just like Shichika.

“Why wouldn’t you keep the Garland with you? Most of the other owners of the Twelve Possessed I’ve met so far refused to let their swords out of their sight.”

Komori Maniwa, who hid Zetto the Leveler in his belly.

Ginkaku Uneri, who slept with Zanto the Razor safely at his hip.

Ditto Zanki Kiguchi.

“But you?”

“I already told you—doing nothing is my game. That sword would only be a nuisance to me. Though I couldn’t exactly toss the thing, when it was given to me by a *friend*—so I figured doing *what I did* was the best bet.”

Higaki’s voice was cool²⁶ and unperturbed.

Shichika could only answer this frivolity with silence.

—Four days earlier.

Togame the Schemer, though caught off-guard by the sudden appearance of this hermit magus—nevertheless commenced diplomacy with all her usual

tenacity.

Almost immediately, Rinne Higaki interrupted.

“Huh? You’re saying you guys want Seito the Garland? Ah, alright. You can have it. It’s yours. Go ahead and take it.”

Then added this:

“You’ll find it buried over there—have fun digging it up. It’s probably, what, a hundred feet²⁷ underground? Of course you’ll have to dig it up yourself, Togame.”

She made it sound like a walk in the park.

...

Meanwhile, Togame the Schemer was a short distance away from them—digging in the spot where Rinne Higaki said she buried Seito the Garland—now for three days straight, using the trowel²⁸ Higaki had lent her.

Needless to say, Togame had not hit paydirt.

So she kept on digging.

“If it was me...” Shichika said.

Addressing Higaki.

His tone acerbic.

“If it was me, I could have dug down a hundred feet in a day, or two days max—why make Togame dig it up herself? Why did you have to tack on the dumb condition that I’m not allowed to help her?”

“From the sound of things, Togame is a little too dependent on your aid—some physical exertion now and then would do her good.”

“Physical exertion? That’s every day for her. She’s nearly died a bunch of times since we’ve been traveling together.”

“I’m sure. And that’s exactly why I’m teasing her—you see, *in her eyes*, that’s the sort of person I appear to be.”

“Huh?” Shichika was baffled by this statement from Higaki. “What the heck—are you saying your appearance borrows from her memory too?”

“You were together when you saw me, so that’s the way it goes. My appearance and mannerisms come from your memory, Yasuri—but my *personality* is derived from hers.”

Derived.

From the memory of Togame the Schemer.

From the failings of Togame the Schemer.

“Does Togame have any failings, though?” asked Shichika. “All I can think of is Princess Negative, but I’m not sure that she sees her as a failing, so much as hates her guts—”

“No one is without some kind of failing, or memory which they are loath to recollect. Including you and Togame, and even this Princess Negative... Let me be clear. If you were to take pity on Togame and help out with her little excavation project,²⁹ our deal is off—I will only allow you to have Seito the Garland if Togame digs the sword up on her own.”

“No need for the reminder.”

Hearing this, Higaki laughed out loud. *Keheheheh*.

“Sure, sure—I’m sure she’ll grin and bear it, for the sake of the Yanari Shogun, for the sake of the Owari Bakufu, and for the sake of the nation.”

“ ...”

For the sake of the nation.

Higaki, Hermit Magus, could not have possibly believed such drivel—that said, although she may have been a projection of Togame’s memories, she could not read her mind, and as such had no access to her true intentions.

All the same, she spoke as if she saw right through her.

Perhaps that was what made Higaki a hermit magus.

Though Shichika also suspected she was just faking it.

“Then again...” she said, like she had thought of something. “Thinking it over, it’s no fair that Togame has a job to do while you sit here bored out of your mind—so tell me, Yasuri, am I correct you won the swords from all the other owners of the Twelve Possessed by battling them head-on?”

“For the most part... I mean, there’s been a couple situations where head-on might not be the best way to describe it, but basically that’s how it’s been so far.”

“In that case, would you like to battle me?”

Higaki pointed at her chest.

“I may not know any hermit magic—but I know a few martial tricks.”³⁰

“If I beat you, will you give us Seito the Garland?”

“Please. I’m not about to alter our conditions—this time around, Togame will be capturing the Mutant Blade on her own. You’re only fighting me as an amusement, to kill some time, for no reason and no purpose whatsoever.”

Responding to this impudent remark, Shichika said, “Why should I fight you, if it’s not for any reason or purpose? In that case, why bother?”

“Why bother?” Higaki laughed. “I should be asking you the same thing—what are you fighting for?”

“...”

Once—Meisai Tsuruga had asked him the same thing.

Shichika had told her he was fighting for Togame.

None of that had changed.

But meanwhile—

That ninja, Kuizame Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa, who had been listening in on his exchange with Meisai—offered the following:

What are you fighting for?

If you have to be asking such questions, don't even bother fighting—

Nobody has time for your philosophy!

Don't be ridiculous!—

That is what the ninja had to say.

“Yasuri. As a hermit magus defying reason...” Higaki—set down the carafe and stood from her seat on the boulder. “I’m of the opinion that it’s time you faced³¹ your failings.”

That same evening.

Shichika checked in on Togame, to see the hole that she was making with her trowel. Most of the time she shooed him off, saying having him just stand there, doing nothing, sapped her productivity.³² As such, if Shichika wanted to talk with Togame, he had to catch her on one of her breaks.

The hole was getting pretty deep—but climbing the rope ladder from its depths, which as of yet were shy of a hundred feet, Togame was miserably dirty.

Her robes, which should have been so brash and brilliant, were smeared with dirt and mud, far too much for even the Schemer to play off as a fashion statement.

Her white hair, too, was blackened by the soil.

“Hmph...”

Nevertheless, she did not whine one bit.

She gulped down water from the bamboo flask³³ that Shichika had brought her.

“Wish you could have burgled Higaki’s carafe for me—I sure could use a drink right about now. It feels like I’m digging through potsherds—like at Lake Fuyo, I’m working through some serious junk.”

“Junk?”

Now that she mentioned it, in their search for information about Kiki Shikizaki, they had conducted another excavation at Lake Fuyo, the Level One Disaster Area—though on that occasion, Shichika had been asked to do the digging on his own.

The tables had turned.

Togame was doing all the work—while Shichika just watched.

Though actually, she wouldn't even let him watch her work.

"Well done, Shichika—sounds like you've uncovered some useful information. Failings, huh. I suppose it could be stranger than that."

"You think..." said Shichika, peering down into the hole Togame had been digging. "You think Seito the Garland is really buried there?"

"Do you feel the lifeforce?"

When Shichika beheld one of the Twelve Possessed—he felt an inexplicable vibration.

Thus far, he had oft relied on this lifeforce to "appraise" potential Mutant Blades.

And yet—the lifeforce test was definitely not foolproof.

"If it is buried down there, I'm not sure I can feel it. Did she say a hundred feet? Buried that deep in the ground—"

"Well, we have no choice but to believe the hermit," said Togame.

Though she refrained from whining—her choice of words betrayed her exhaustion.

"Another thing, Shichika. Are you planning to fight Higaki?"

"Oh. I'm not really interested in fighting for no reason—but it's hard for me to sit there doing nothing, while you're working over here like crazy. Same way as our pointless chat was anything but pointless, there's surely something to be gained from fighting her. End of the day, fighting is the only thing I'm good at, so I guess I'll fight," answered Shichika. "Unless you stop me."

“I have no plans of stopping you,” Togame said, massaging her arms. “Have fun. It’s bound to be constructive.”³⁴ Fighting a hermit magus—I’m sure you’ll learn all sorts of helpful things from that experience, Shichika.”

“Alright.”

“Think of it this way—we have it pretty easy,³⁵ capturing one of the Twelve Possessed by just digging a hole. You know, it makes me wonder how much that nasty woman knew about these circumstances in advance. If she was hoping to get on my nerves, this was quite a shrewd move.”

“Princess Negative—oh, wait.”

What Togame had said made Shichika remember something, so he told her.

“If Higaki is for real, then on the outside she’s a manifestation of my failings—while on the inside, she’s made up of yours.”

Konayuki Itezora. Nanami Yasuri. Zanki Kiguchi.

And Meisai Tsuruga.

Higaki’s outward appearance drew upon these four.

While on the inside.

“Does Higaki’s arrogant personality remind you of someone in your life? Doesn’t seem like Princess Negative. Or Emonzaemon... Only other person I can think of would be Hohoh Maniwa, but it doesn’t seem like it’s him either.”

“Heh.”

A chuckle.

Togame the Schemer chuckled dejectedly.

“Plain enough. I don’t need you to talk it through, and I don’t need to think it

over either—Higaki is the spitting image of the person who has given me a harder time than anyone in my entire life. Her manner of speaking, that self-important delivery. Goofing around, like nothing matters—but most of all, the way she forced me to do manual labor. Shichika, she acts exactly like the man I dislike more than anyone who ever lived.”

“Who?”

“Takahito Hida,” said Togame. “She’s a dead ringer³⁶ for my father.”

¹ 加担 KATAN “shoulder the load”

² 合法的に虐殺 GŌHŌTEKI NI GYAKUSATSU massacred legally ³ 巨城 KYOJŌ giant castle

⁴ 既視感 KISHIKAN “feeling you have seen before”

⁵ 暇 HIMA idle

⁶ うすら寒い USURA SAMUI chilly

⁷ 正しい体 TADASHII KARADA correct body (unpacks 正体 SHŌTAI true nature, “backstory”) ⁸ 人を食った HITO WO KUTTA “eaten a person” arrogant ⁹ 無縁 MUEN (colloquial) unrelated; also, absence of 縁 EN ties (as in the Buddhist concept) ¹⁰ 諭す SATOSU admonish

¹¹ 悟った SATOTTA enlightened plays with sounds of 諭す SATOSU

¹² 銚にかけるまでもなく SEN NI KAKERU MADE MO NAKU “no need to place on the scales” plays on 誠刀 銚 SEITŌ HAKARI Seito the Garland ¹³ 流し目 NAGASHIME “drifting eyes” flirtatious connotations ¹⁴ 得心 TOKUSHIN “gain heart” be convinced ¹⁵ 一貫した IKKAN SHITA consistently

¹⁶ 苦手意識 NIGATE ISHIKI insecurity about someone or something 苦い NIGAI bitter ¹⁷ 戦う者 TATAKAU MONO fighter (by nature) ¹⁸ 仙術 SENJUTSU the tricks of a mountain ascetic ¹⁹ 身も蓋もない MI MO FUTA MO NAI “no container or lid” blunt (remark) ²⁰ 神通力 JINTSŪRIKI “divine penetrating power”

²¹ 人知 JINCHI “human understanding”

²² 心根 KOKORONE “heart-roots”

²³ しでかす SHIDEKASU undertake, grandly and usu. needlessly ²⁴ 若造 WAKAZŌ “young build” youth ²⁵ 身に帯びて MI NI OBITE “have wrapped around the body” (as with the tie string of a scabbard) ²⁶ 恬として TEN TOSHITE indifferent ²⁷ 十丈 JŪ JŌ ten *jo*, an archaic unit (1 *jo* = approx. 10 ft.) ²⁸ 移植こて ISHOKU GOTE small shovel used for gardening ²⁹ 発掘作業 HAKKUTSU SAGYŌ (archaeological) “dig”

³⁰ 戦術 SENJUTSU tactics homophonous with 仙術 SENJUTSU hermit magic ³¹ 向き合う MUKI AU “turn and meet” confront ³² 作業効率 SAGYŌ KŌRITSU “operational efficiency” sounds anachronistic in the original too ³³ 水筒 SUI TŌ “water tube” 筒 TSUTSU signifies a section of bamboo ³⁴ 有益 YŪEKI beneficial, fruitful ³⁵ 安いもの YASUI MONO “cheap thing” accomplished with little effort ³⁶ 瓜二つ URI FUTATSU “like two gourds” peas in a pod

CHAPTER FIVE

SELF- AWARENESS





The next day—Shichika Yasuri and Rinne Higaki faced off as planned, on the morning after our duo’s fourth night bivouacking at Hyakkeijo.

They hadn’t seen Higaki sleep a wink.

She just sat there on her boulder.

Doing nothing—sitting up all night.

Perhaps that was what made Higaki a hermit magus.

Literally doing nothing, sleep included.

And now—the two of them were facing off.

Since Togame the Schemer had been shoveling away since waking up, she was unable to play her usual role of referee—but there would be no refereeing.

This was for fun.

Since they were only killing time.

“I will say this, though,” Higaki said, shaking her arms and legs in some kind of preliminary stretch. “The failings I embody for you keep to the surface—I have none of the monstrous strength of, what’s her name, Konayuki Itezora, nor do I have any of the genius of your dear sister, and nothing of the seriousness of your buddy Zanki Kiguchi.”

“I mean, if you had even a shred of the seriousness Kiguchi has, I doubt we

would have wound up in this situation.”

The arrogant personality—of Takahito Hida.

The personality of Togame’s father.

Shichika had a difficult time believing that a man of such high standing, the leader of an army, could have such a flippant personality.

Unlikely enough for a girl.

But absurd for a daimyo.

“Get it, Yasuri?”

Higaki continued.

“I’m disproportionately weaker than you—remember that, once we begin.”

“Weak...” Having a hard time grasping what Higaki meant by this, Shichika nodded cautiously.¹ “What’s that, a frontloaded excuse for losing?”

“I’m afraid not—you’re unable to beat someone weaker than you. Winning is off the table. Do I make myself clear?”

“...”

“Alright—come and get it, as they say, but watch out, ’cause I’m coming to getcha!”

Sticking a fork into² their conversation.

Rinne Higaki, out of nowhere, made a run at Shichika.

As before—Higaki was unarmed.

To wit, she had not so much as a gimlet.³

As should come as no surprise, Shichika was also emptyhanded—having doffed

his armguards, as was his practice, the Master of the Kyotoryu was ready to rumble.

And so—Shichika Yasuri versus Rinne Higaki.

Swordplay betwixt two parties lacking swords!

“Kyotoryu—Yuri!”

Shichika spun from the hips, countering Higaki with a spinning kick—except the second that he moved, he knew that his defeat was certain.

This bum-rush⁴ from Higaki.

Had been a ruse.

Her way of getting Shichika to fight back—an inelegant attack, intent on inducing an inelegant interception.

Higaki threw an elbow up against Shichika’s kicking leg.

Tipping him off-balance.

“Whah...”

He was sure he knew where she was aiming next, but Higaki didn’t follow through. Instead she pulled away, taking one step back.

Shichika quickly recovered his balance.

Her counterattack had caught him unawares, but this proved Higaki was not lying about the similarities only being skin deep—if she had shared the monstrous strength of Konayuki Itezora, her rising arm could easily have blown his leg to pieces.

She was physically fit, to be sure—but not to any unbelievable degree.⁵ Her strength was well within the confines of believability.

Knowing that much was enough.

No monstrous strength, and no genius.

Though he would have loved her to be serious—

“Kyotoryu—Bara!”

Shichika came at Higaki with a front kick.

Since she looked half as tall as him, he had to be choosy with his attacks—had to bear in mind that grappling moves and throw moves would not serve him in this fight.

That left strikes.

Which should be plenty!

“Whoa, nice one.”

Higaki calmly ducked his front kick—and when Shichika bore down on her, she summarily blocked, dodged, or brushed away the blades of his hands and feet.

You guessed it—





She saw his attacks coming.

“Ugh...”

He remembered.

A month earlier—in his fourth fight against Zanki Kiguchi.

The fight in which neither of them bore a sword—though Shichika was beginning to realize what made this fight and that fight completely different.

Something—wasn’t clicking.⁶

Like there was sand between his teeth⁷—

“Kyotoryu—Shichika Hachiretsu!”

Since it would appear that he was getting nowhere,⁸ Shichika resorted to the Last Fatal Orchid of the Kyotoryu.

The Seven Fatal Orchids of the Kyotoryu.

Fatal Orchid One: Kyoka Suigetsu.

Fatal Orchid Two: Kacho Fugetsu.

Fatal Orchid Three: Hyakka Ryoran.

Fatal Orchid Four: Ryuryoku Kako.

Fatal Orchid Five: Hika Rakuyo.

Fatal Orchid Six: Kinjo Tenka.

Fatal Orchid Seven: Rakka Rozeki.

In the Last Fatal Orchid, Shichika Hachiretsu, he unleashed them simultaneously—though note that this was not “Shichika Hachiretsu Redux,” the updated sequence he had devised at Seiryoin Gokenji Temple in Tosa, after his

fight against the genius Nanami Yasuri, but rather “Shichika Hachiretsu,” the classic form.

Flawed, perhaps—but more adaptable.

Not necessarily inferior to its flush-riveted update—however!

“Oops, oops.”

Hopping away.

Rinne Higaki created so much space between them there was no way Shichika Hachiretsu could reach her.

“Wha... Y-You—”

Shichika almost called her a cheat.

Granted, all that she had done was smartly retreat, so such a reproach would hardly have been fair—but this last move helped Shichika to finally see the light.

Rinne Higaki.

Doesn't care—about this fight at all.

Though inviting it upon herself—she's barely even fighting.

“So sad, Yasuri. It seems that you have quite the inferiority complex towards your genius of a sister, but in the eyes of a lowly hermit such as myself, you're a fine young specimen in your own right, a genius of the first degree—”

Dodging Shichika's strikes, Higaki grinned.

“—On a scale from one to ten, where your strength index is at the top, I'm probably somewhere around seven. If you gave me everything you've got, I couldn't even hold my own.”

“Then! How come you haven't been torn to smithereens?!”

“Thing is, you’re splitting your ten-out-of-ten power down the middle, dividing it between offense and defense, so that your attacks are only half as strong. As a result—because I’m putting all my strength into my defense—you’re unable to break through my defenses. After all,” said Higaki, “Seito the Garland’s special characteristic—is self-awareness.”⁹

“What do you mean, the characteristic of the Garland?”

The hardest sword in all the world, Zetto the Leveler.

The sharpest sword in all the world, Zanto the Razor.

The most myriad sword in all the world, Sento the Legion.

The frailest sword in all the world, Hakuto the Whisper.

The toughest sword in all the world, Zokuto the Armor.

The heaviest sword in all the world, Soto the Twin.

The wickedest sword in all the world, Akuto the Eel.

The most humanoid¹⁰ sword in all the world, Bito the Sundial.

The most innocuous¹¹ sword in all the world, Oto the Cured.

“The sincerest sword in all the world—verily so, indeed! And how could it be otherwise, with me as its owner?”

“Cut the crap! What makes you sincere?”¹²

“Whoa, whoa. Be careful with your accusations—that side of me comes from your darling Togame.”

“Dammit!”

Consider Zokuto the Armor.

Unparalleled in armor class.

No attack was capable of breaking through the Armor in and of itself—in an example of how defense can surpass offense in certain applications. And unlike Azekura, Higaki made no effort to convert this defense into offense—her *modus operandi* being exclusively defensive.¹³

Truly, no attack from Shichika had so much as marred Higaki.

The blades of his hand missed her entirely.

The blades of his feet slicing only air.

“I’m done!”

Thump.

Shichika gave up attacking Higaki and plopped down on the earth.

Sulking on the ground of Hyakkeijo.

“Cripes, this isn’t even a real fight! Enough of this stuff about confronting failings—I’m not here to help you finally get some exercise! I’d much rather be swinging a wooden sword at Kiguchi! You think it’s fun adding to my list of failings?”

“Sure do. There’s nothing I love more than teasing you.”

Higaki said this without a hint of shame.

“It’s interesting to hear you say you’re helping me to get some exercise, when I’m the one helping you kill time. Is that such a bad thing?”

As she spoke, Higaki dropped her guard—at ease, she sallied over to the little boulder and took her usual perch.

Then laughed out loud. *Keheheheh*.

“You know, some people would learn a hard-won¹⁴ lesson from this kind of fight.”

“Yeah?”

“One ought to try and take a lesson from a fight,” Higaki said, pointing at Shichika. “You know, things like ‘Fighting is pointless,’ or ‘It’s not whether you win or lose.’ I heard Togame say our fight was bound to be *constructive*, but the experience of battle is inherently destructive. Even the constructive moments are unsettling. At this point you have spent close to a year fighting for Togame—but it would seem that you have failed to learn this on your own. Kind as I am, I decided I would teach you.”

“Next time, save it.” Shichika made no effort to conceal his displeasure. “Not like that hasn’t crossed my mind before—but we’ve got a job to do, and that gives fighting and success¹⁵ definite value.”

“Where do those words come from, you—or Togame?”

Higaki turned away.

Toward the hole Togame was digging—since by now she had dug several times her height, they could no longer see her.

Yet as if she could—Higaki gazed in her direction.

“Her too,” she said. “So hung up on fighting. It’s almost like—she sees life itself as some kind of a battle. What exactly is her motivation? I’m sure you know. Although you don’t agree with it.”

“ ... ”

“You don’t agree with it, you merely sympathize.¹⁶ Isn’t that right?”

“No—this isn’t about sympathy.”

“You’ve fallen for her, haven’t you? It’s too bad,” Higaki said, oozing sarcasm. “As far as I can see, your feelings for her fail to qualify as love or romance.”

“You’ll pay...for saying that.”

Shichika found himself threatening Higaki—but she brushed it off like it was nothing.

“You can ignore me, I was only joking,” Higaki said. “If this sort of thing bothers you that much, when you hear what I really think about you, you’re probably going to faint—not like it’s my duty¹⁷ to inform you of such things.”

“You call yourself a hermit magus.”

Shichika stood up, moving sluggishly.

Though he had not received any blows from his opponent, and was not tired—his motions had one way or another become sluggish.

He was tuckered out.

“But honestly—who the hell are you?”

“Have you misunderstood me? You do realize that this, too, is merely an indication of the way that I appear to you. Where do you think this irritation that you feel towards me is coming from? It’s you. A manifestation of your failings—nothing more.”

“...”

“Still, though, the foolish honesty with which you accepted my offer and consented to have a face off shows that you have promise¹⁸ yet, my boy—compared to you, Togame is, how shall I say, rather intransigent, cunning even. Over there, digging like crazy, when her only interest is to stay as far away from me as possible.”

“Oh—”

Come to think of it.

Shichika had been the only one to interact significantly with Higaki.

A first among the owners of the Twelve Possessed.

“Yeah, but Togame didn’t find out that you’re only a projection of our failings until last night.”

“Because for her—it’s about personality. That’s how her failings manifest. Since yours take shape on the surface, it took a little extra time to notice. I reckon...she’ll probably keep on looking away like that forever. Turned away for as long as she lives.”

Which is one way to live a life, Higaki said, her tone of voice unchanged, flippant as ever. “Fact is—whatever else I might have told her, the second she heard me say ‘It’s buried over there,’ she knew exactly where to find the Garland. Instead of trying to dig it up herself like an honest fool, she should leave it to you.”

“You’re the one who said that was off-limits.”

“And she’s the one who’s following the rules. What’s stopping her from breaking the promise that she made with me?”

“Isn’t it honorable to honor promises?”

“Oh yes, and how she wants to be admired,” Higaki quipped sardonically. “She craves the admiration of her past self, or the admiration of her future self, or perhaps the admiration of the gods. Not for me to say—but in the end, she will have failed to overcome her failings. Because she has a guilty conscience, she will never break the rules.”

Higaki paused for effect.

As if to observe Shichika's reaction.

"You see—she has forgotten the most important thing."

"What?"

"I wonder. Although I cannot read her mind, I'm certain that she's forgotten something of great importance. And you know what—she has no hopes of remembering it, either, as long as she does not confront her failings. Which would be fine, if it wasn't something that she wanted desperately to recall—but still."

Following suit with Shichika, Higaki stood.

Even standing, she was less than half as tall as Shichika.

Nevertheless.

He felt inexplicably¹⁹ intimidated.

Something in her gaze—made it feel like she was looking down at him.

"Hard to live a long life when you live like that. Given how much success means to her, I recognize that this is in the service of her goals, but isn't the ultimate goal of any human being survival? What good's success if you have to kill yourself to get there?"

"Life's a small price to pay for reaching a goal. Don't you think that's an admirable and proper way to live? Or does being a hermit lead you to think otherwise?"

"I'm not too sure about that." Higaki had herself a chuckle. "I never think of anything at all—if I appear to be, the two of you are doing the thinking."

"..."

Insinuation.

Pretense.

Innuendo, mischief.

And she called herself a hermit magus?

Yet Shichika knew that on an overarching level, Higaki was not incorrect—the fact that everything she said stung so bad was evidence that she had struck a nerve.

“Here’s a good example, Yasuri.”

Higaki was still—looking away from Shichika.

Looking instead in the direction of the hole Togame was digging.

Or perhaps.

Was she looking in the direction of her sword, Seito the Garland?

The sincerest blade?

“For one person to reach her goal, how many other people’s goals must be stymied?”

“ ... ”

“It’s not possible for everyone to meet their goals and live happily ever after—for one person to achieve happiness, a great many others will pay the price. Am I not stating the obvious here? Human beings survive only by sacrificing one another.”

“How do you mean? Togame isn’t after happiness. If anybody’s life is being sacrificed, it’s hers.”

“Which I believe to be precisely what Togame is the most averse to

seeing—she knows that better than anyone. And while I cannot say for sure what she’s trying to achieve—I’m certain that it isn’t worth her sacrificing her own life, much less the lives of others.”

“But—”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Yasuri.”

Refusing to let Shichika object, Higaki doubled down.

“In hunting down the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki, have you not taken countless lives? Stymying the supreme human objective of survival?”

“...”

Komori Maniwa.

Ginkaku Uneri.

Meisai Tsuruga.

Hakuhei Sabi.

The slew of challengers he had killed off after becoming the Strongest in Japan.

And his own sister—Nanami Yasuri.

All dead—at his own hand.

“When you kill someone,” Higaki said, “you do realize they die, Yasuri. Though it would seem you’ve turned your head away from this elementary principle.²⁰ And so has our dear Togame—she thinks she’s faced the facts, except her eyes are closed. The way I see it—you and her are both—*lacking resolution*.”

Higaki took a breath.

“The Garland gives a reading on the self—it’s like a scale, allowing you to

gauge the balance of your deeds. Could you let Togame know? It seems like we're not speaking."

"Fine..."

Shichika nodded begrudgingly.

So the Garland was like a scale.

He pondered²¹ the meaning of this explanation.

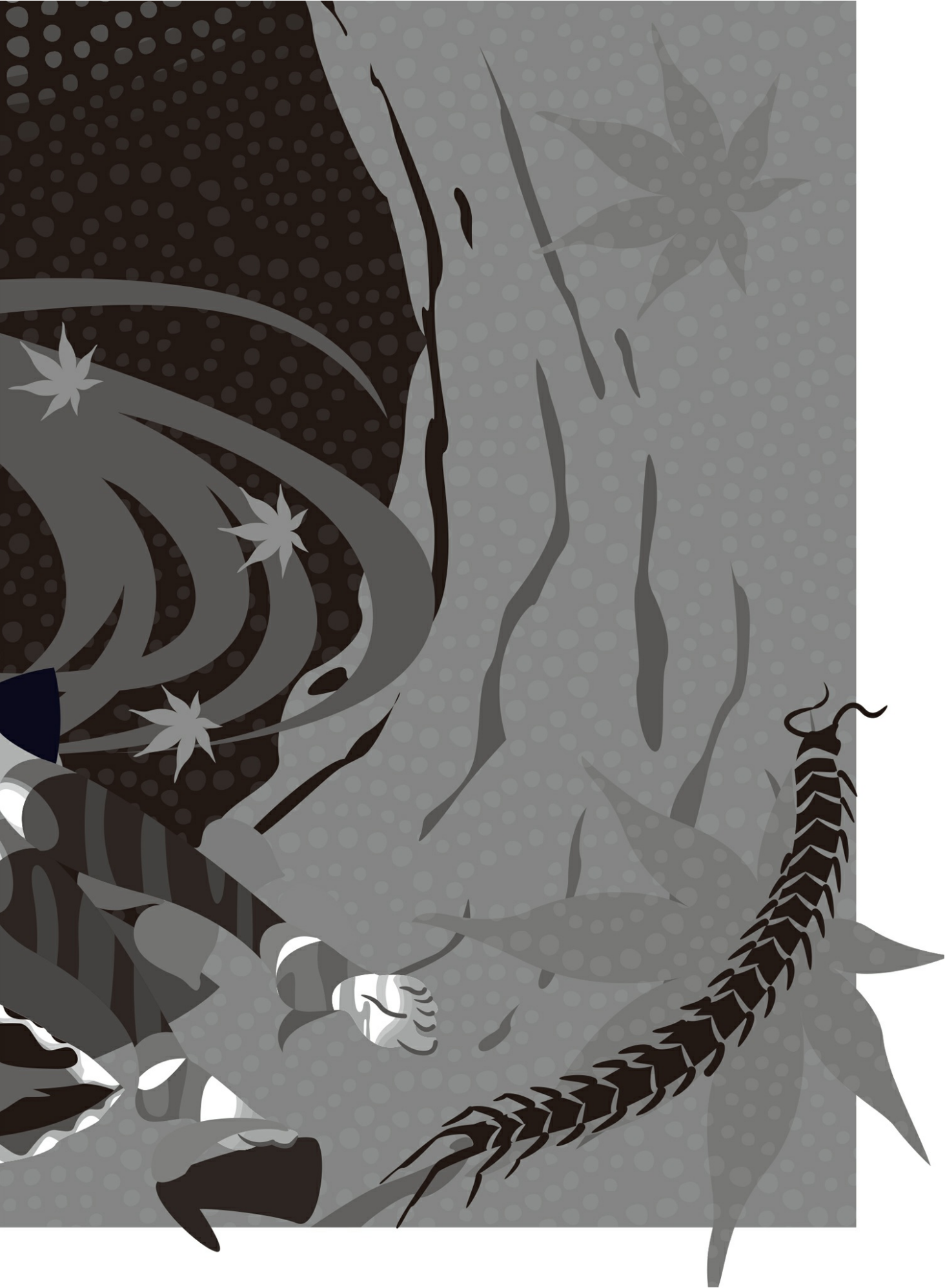
In actuality—it was Rinne Higaki, Hermit Magus, who acted like a balance.

A scale weighing human behavior.

"I'll let her know during her next break."

"That would seem to be right now," Higaki said, glancing in the direction of Togame. "At the moment, it would seem she's out of energy and resting in the hole."







Digging a hole, only to fill it up again.

When done involuntarily and repeatedly, this is a form of torture.

An example of how repetitive menial labor can drive a person crazy, though Togame the Schemer was not so weak in spirit as to be driven crazy by such a trifling matter.

Only her physical resources were limited.

As seen from her traversals²² of such inhospitable environments as Inaba Desert, Mt. Odori, and Lake Fuyo, she was able to withstand a decent trek, no weaker than the average person—but this didn't mean that she was notably²³ stronger than the average person either.

If tacticians deal in tactics, then the Schemer dealt exclusively in schemes. A strategist eschewing armaments of every stripe, able to fend off hardship and adversity by strategy alone—

She had never had a reason to temper her body.

In fact, it was important that she not.

Hence—

“Togame!”

The Schemer had collapsed in the hole.

Just as Rinne Higaki indicated.

Shichika leapt down into the hole without delay. Togame was unconscious; he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her body, trying to awaken her. It was quite a dangerous thing to do to someone who was unconscious, but as luck would have it—

“Mm.”

She came to.

“Ugh... Hey, Shichirin.”

“Uh, I think nickname’s run its course...are you okay?”

“Right. I must have fainted.”

Although she had lost consciousness—Togame had not let go of the trowel.

By now dirt covered her from head to toe, but nevertheless, she brushed the soil off her face and resumed her excavation.

“Whoa—let’s take a break.”

“It’s not time for my break yet.”

“Focus on the way you’re feeling, not the time. Don’t tell me you don’t know how.”

“Hmph...”

It was no use—Togame wasn’t listening. She stabbed her trowel in the dirt, scooped some up, and tossed it in the bucket beside her. When the bucket was full, she carried it up the rope ladder.

Then started again.

The same thing, over and over.

From the looks of it²⁴—she had dug about fifty feet.

Halfway there.

Over the course of the morning, she had made remarkable progress as compared to the days before—perhaps she had grasped the finer points²⁵ of hole digging.

Almost impressive—still.

Something had to give.

Her increased efficiency no more than a warning that she was working far too hard.

“Uh, Togame, I gotta ask you something important.”

“Ask me something?”

“Yeah, I need your advice.”

This was not about advice, of course.

But Shichika understood Togame—he knew that if he put it this way, she would stop working for at least as long as he was talking. While she probably guessed what Shichika was up to, she was not so mentally depleted as to ignore²⁶ his clumsy attempts at connecting.²⁷ She owed this to him, as his employer.

Her fatigue was merely physical.

Sore arms for sure, but likely sore all over.

Advice—

Considering the situation, it must involve Rinne Higaki.

“Like I said yesterday, Higaki and I had a face off—but let’s just say it was no

contest.”²⁸

“Huh? You mean you lost?”

“No, I wouldn’t say I lost...”

Togame frowned. She looked skeptical.

“Then again,” continued Shichika, “I wouldn’t say I won. It was no contest. Literally. She dodged everything I threw at her.”

Shichika gave her an unabridged account.

Including all the nonsense Higaki had spewed.

Togame looked a little bored, but she waited for Shichika to finish.

“Not sure I buy that,” she confessed. “All this self-awareness stuff aside, I don’t see how focusing exclusively on defense would make any difference—all she did was throw the fight.”

“I mean, as much as it got under my skin, I gotta say it was pretty effective. You can’t have a duel unless both sides agree—if one side throws the fight, the other side no longer has a way of winning.”

“I beg to differ,” said Togame. “Fundamentally, there’s a big hole in Higaki’s strategy of choice. If you can take aim at the hole, you will be able to plunder her defenses, regardless of how focused they may be.”

“A big hole?”

Higaki’s strategy of putting all her strength into defense.

The hermit magus lacking hermit magic.

What kind of a hole did her strategy have?

“If that’s the case, tell me what I gotta do—I know I didn’t lose exactly, but it

feels like I lost and it's getting me down. The way she says and does things is so aggravating²⁹—I gotta get back at her, or I'll never settle down.”

“Come on...use your head a little. Basically, she—”

Togame stopped midsentence—stopped moving entirely.

She had been about to tell him something, but now her lips were sealed.

She only narrowed her eyes—until finally.

“Right,” she said. “Right...that's what it is. Or rather, what it means...”

“Huh?”

Togame's mutterings made Shichika nervous—but she did not pay him any mind.

She picked up the trowel and stabbed it in the earth.

“Ugh—I can't stand her personality.”

Still only fifty feet deep.

Or fifty feet shallow.

But then—the tip of her trowel dinged³⁰ against something that could not be dirt.

“To-Togame?”

“Basically...” Togame smiled bitterly and spoke in an acid tone. “We've been tricked.”

¹ 曖昧な風 AIMAI NA FŪ in a vague manner ² 打ち切って UCHIKITTE cutting off (communications) ³ 寸鉄 SUNTETSU small blade vs. 寸鉄人を刺

す SUNTETSU HITO WO SASU “gimlet tongue”

⁴ 突貫 TOKKAN (sudden) charge ⁵ 常識を超える JŌSHIKI WO KOERU surpassing common sense ⁶ 噛み合わない KAMI AWANAI failing to “bite each other,” as with intermeshing gears ⁷ 砂でも噛んでいる SUNA DEMO KANDE IRU biting on something like sand ⁸ らちが明かない RACHI GA AKANAI “the horse fencing won’t open” idiom for a standstill ⁹ 誠刀防衛 SEITŌ BŌEI “defense of the honest sword” pun on 正当防衛 SEITŌ BŌEI (lawful) self-defense ¹⁰ 人的 JINTEKI human-like ¹¹ 無毒 MUDOKU “without poison”

¹² 誠実 SEIJITSU “honest and true”

¹³ 専守防衛 SENSHU BŌEI security policy restricted to defense, *e.g.* in the Japanese constitution ¹⁴ 得がたき EGATAKI “difficult to gain”

¹⁵ 勝ち負け KACHI MAKE winning or losing ¹⁶ 同調 同情 DŌCHŌ DŌJŌ “same tune” “same sentiment”

¹⁷ 義理 GIRI (unwritten) job, responsibility ¹⁸ 見所 MIDOKORO “something to see”

¹⁹ 形容しがたい KEIYŌ SHIGATAI “hard to describe”

²⁰ 原理 GENRI “source reason”

²¹ 噛み締める KAMI SHIMERU savor vs. 噛み合う KAMI AU intermesh ²² 行脚 ANGYA “go on legs” pilgrimage ²³ 逸脱 ITSUDATSU deviate ²⁴ 目算 MOKUSAN visual estimation ²⁵ こつ KOTSU “the hang of it” knack ²⁶ 無下にする MUGE NI SURU dismiss as meaningless ²⁷ 思いやり OMOI YARI considerateness ²⁸ 勝負にならなくて SHŌBU NI NARANAKUTE “did not

amount to a battle”

²⁹ むかつく MUKATSUKU upsetting, for the stomach or figuratively ³⁰ がつ
り GATSURI onomatopoeia for striking a hard object or surface



CHAPTER SIX

TAKAHITO
HIDA



The next day—

After waiting an entire twenty-four hours, Togame the Schemer paid a visit to the so-called hermit magus, Rinne Higaki, owner of Seito the Garland.

As usual, or as to be expected, Higaki was perched atop her little boulder—though for whatever reason, she was blowing on a reed.¹

Toot, toot.

When Higaki noticed Togame approaching, she stopped playing.

And tossed the reed into the wind.

“Hey there.” Higaki smiled broadly at Togame. “If it isn’t Togame—the Schemer. What happened to that hole that you were digging so devotedly?”

“Hah.”

Refusing to be the butt of Higaki’s joke—Togame snorted and sat down cross-legged on the ground in front of the boulder.

At this point, no use worrying about her clothes getting dirty.

Having a wardrobe vast as hers, Togame was able to change into fresh clothes every day, so her current outfit was unsoiled as of yet—but over the past four days of her “excavation project,” she had grown considerably comfortable in the dirt.

“What happened to Yasuri? I don’t see him anywhere—there’s no place for a lug like him to hide in all of Hyakkeijo. Unless you buried him inside your hole?”

“I sent him to buy foodstuffs for us at the nearest village—though even Shichika probably realized I was just keeping him busy.”

With that.

Togame drew *a certain something* from her kimono.

A certain something.

First the hilt of a katana.

The hilt. And then the handguard.

And then—but *that was it*.

“Seito the Garland—I presume?” said Togame.

“Why ask me—when you can have Shichika use his sixth sense? You don’t need me to tell you what it is.”

Though after saying this—Higaki confirmed, “Yeah, that’s it.”

A swordless sword—only a hilt and handguard.

“Though you uncovered it much faster than expected—you could have dug for your whole life and never found the thing, Togame.”

“Hah. What was that about a hundred feet? Where the hell did that random number come from? It was only buried half as deep as that.”

“You expect me to remember that after three hundred years? So I was fifty feet off. Call it random, but I call that the margin of error.”

Higaki was feigning ignorance.

“Besides, if you had done things differently, Togame, you would never have

found Seito the Garland—not a hundred feet down or even a thousand.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You *realized* something, didn’t you? If you had never had that realization—I doubt you would have found the Garland a mere fifty feet below the surface. On the other hand, if you had realized it immediately, you would have found it the instant your trowel sank into the earth.”

“Well. You sure have a way of making flights of fancy² sound matter-of-fact—I bet you merely calculated³ how long it would take for me to suss out your game and buried Seito the Garland accordingly.”

“A reasonable assumption—but if that were the case, Togame, and you continued your excavation hellbent on antagonism—would you have had the mental space to realize that a sword like this, only a hilt and handguard, could be one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki?”

“I doubt it,” Togame admitted begrudgingly. “But that’s where Shichika’s sixth sense comes into play.”

“This sixth sense of his allows him to be sure of what is not a Mutant Blade, but it does not allow him to be sure of whether something is—did he not say he was unsure of Zetto the Leveler being so?”

“That stupid boy⁴—of course he had to let that slip.”

“Don’t say such things. He is a fine young man—at least in my opinion,” Higuchi said nonchalantly. “As you are well aware, I am a manifestation of your failings and his combined. His failings are manifest almost exclusively in my exterior appearance, while on the inside, by which I mean my personality or constitution, I mostly comprise your failings, Togame—and what do you suppose that all this means in practice?”

“ ... ”

“Because of his upbringing, you might assume Shichika to have had a harder time dealing with his father than his sister—but that has not been his experience. Perhaps he’s simple, or perhaps he’s just an imbecile—but he is not what you call maladjusted.”

“High praise.”

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t say this to his face. I’m too much of a contrarian⁵ for that—how else would I have made it as a hermit?”

Higaki laughed out loud. *Keheheheh.*

“In that sense, you’re something of a hermit in your own right, my dear Togame. You’re a bit more contrary than most—you’ve accused me of being *calculating*, but how could I have begun to guess when you would find Seito the Garland?”

“You bogged us down with all those riddles, incapacitating Shichika. I’d say you had a guess, alright. But now I understand,” Togame said, wielding the Garland—only a hilt and handguard, a sword without a blade. “Seito the Garland—encourages an analysis⁶ of the self.⁷ It slashes self-perceptions—testing the identity, enabling self-awareness. Hence why it has no blade—making it a swordless sword.”

“Precisely,”⁸ certified Higaki, with an exaggerated show of applause.

“It makes sense, thinking it over—storing a Mutant Blade under the ground is hardly what I’d call safekeeping, but if there’s no blade to keep safe, there’s no issue.”

“I find your way of working backwards⁹ disagreeable—though I suppose that’s

just the way you are.”

“There’s that detestable personality,” Togame said, practically spitting out the words. “You sound exactly like¹⁰ him.”

“Like him? Oh, you mean my personality—as you are well aware, these failings you see in me are not the result of my reading your mind. Make no mistake—you’re seeing me this way entirely of your own accord. Understand? I have no clue who you mean by *him*. Would you mind clueing me in?”

“...”

“Relax. I’m a hermit magus. My lips are sealed¹¹—I promise not to tell the world about your failings.”

“...I mean my father,” Togame finally said, after much deliberation.¹² “I won’t tell you his name or divulge any more particulars—but to me, you sound exactly like him.”

“Is that right? Sounds like a bad dad.”

Though in a sense referring to herself, Higaki made it sound like someone else entirely.

Of course, this wasn’t actually about her.

Though even this—reminded Togame of him.

Togame’s father.

The Kaoyaku of Oshu, Takahito Hida.

A sore spot for Togame.

A great failing indeed.

And this failing—is what made Togame see Higaki in this manner.

“Well, is this father of yours alive? Judging by how robustly his personality has manifested, I gather he’s alive and kicking... Is your relationship antagonistic?”

“He’s dead, but he has never been an enemy of mine, in life or death,” replied Togame. “I might even go so far as to say that my father is my reason for living—certainly the reason for conducting my Sword Hunt for the Shikizaki blades. Antagonistic? Hardly.”

“He is, however, a failing of yours,” Higaki noted lightheartedly. “Isn’t that right? Admitting this—is the only reason you discovered Seito the Garland, and why you’re finally showing yourself to me, after being so evasive. No one forced you to come report back to me about your big discovery.”

“Time to face my failings, huh.” It was as if Togame were ignoring what Higaki said—and at the same time, confronting her message head-on. “You make it sound so easy—but that sort of thing is deceptively¹³ complex—even once you stop averting or closing your eyes.”

“You got it!” said Higaki. “I’m glad you figured things out before your muscles got too sore.”

“Sore? I’m sore all over. My muscles are ready to snap.” Togame wagged her arms to underscore her point. “Though I must say, facing you like this has made me realize a variety of things. If only in that sense, I must admit I’m grateful.”

“So, what did you realize? You seem to have forgotten some very important things.”

“Well, for one thing—my father’s last words to me.”

She remembered how Takahito Hida looked in his last moments.

Vividly remembered watching Mutsue Yasuri take his life—and yet.

Togame had forgotten.

The last words of Takahito Hida.

Even forgetting—she had forgotten them.

“Since the memory was a total mess, it took quite a bit of time to sort things out, even for a thinker such as myself.”

“There’s one thing that sort of puzzled me,”¹⁴ Higaki said, as if the thought was no more than a passing fancy. “Why didn’t you sic Yasuri on me after our first fight? Knowing you—I’m sure you instantly thought up some clever way to have him beat me.”

“On a scale from one to ten, where Shichika’s strength is at the top, you’re seven—but Shichika divided his strength equally, between offense and defense. Then you devoted all your strength to defense—which makes it seven to five in your favor, right?”

Togame spoke calmly, breaking it down.

“That makes it simple. *If you devote all your strength to defense, Shichika has no reason to defend himself*—whereby he may as well focus entirely on offense. That makes it ten to seven, in his favor—does it not?”

“You got it.” Higaki nodded magnanimously,¹⁵ pleased with her response. “I’m not so sure that I would call it simple, but Yasuri could have worked it out if you had told him what to do. But you didn’t. Why is that? It would have been a great way of letting him blow off steam.”

“Because I realized there was another way of seeing things.”

Realized.

She had made a realization.

“If Shichika devoted all his strength—*all ten points to defense*, what then? There wouldn’t be a battle at all, much less a winner. Therefore—”

Togame glanced at Seito the Garland.

But since it lacked a blade—her eyes had nothing to catch.

“By foregoing offensive tactics, we were able to achieve our objective, without actually having to win the fight—case closed.”

“Go on,” Higaki urged her.

Togame nodded.

“Infuriating as it may be, it is exactly as you say—if I had failed to make this realization, and I had happened upon this hilt and handguard, I never would have thought it was a sword. At best I would have seen it as an artifact, discarded in an execution site—and tossed it aside with all the other trash that I uncovered in the dig. I doubt I would have thought to ask for Shichika to appraise it. I thought it was the blade that makes the sword—necessitating the likes of superior steel that never bends or breaks or loses its edge. I’m not about to toss that idea aside—but I’ve realized there’s another way of seeing things.

“The hilt and the handguard are without question part of a katana. In the absence of a blade, this sword needs not a scabbard to protect it—which means to carry it, you simply hold it tight, like this—a hilt and handguard, all you need to face yourself, with firm conviction. Isn’t that so?”

“Splendid. Precisely!” Higaki said. “Perhaps my hints gave it away.”

She was probably right.

Yet this, too—reflected the personality of her father.

The personality of Takahito Hida.

He always said—one word too many.

Not to his detriment—but to his profit.

She remembered.

“Clever girl, my dear Togame.”

“It’s unbelievably annoying to be talked down to like that, when you appear to be a child. But whatever—listen Higaki. In recognition¹⁶ of my cleverness, how about answering a question from me?”

“Sure. Ask me as many as you want.”

“You mentioned receiving Seito the Garland directly from Kiki Shikizaki—in that case, when the Old Shogun arrived with an army¹⁷ to wrest this sword from you, how did you fend him off? Where were you during the Age of Warring States?”

“On the battlefield—trekking my way from one realm to the next. Though hermit magus I may be, I cannot afford to be aloof in times of war. I performed the daring feat of fighting without doing anything at all—wielding Seito the Garland, I checked a good many adversaries along the way. By checked, of course, I mean suppressed.”

“...”

“Fending off the Old Shogun was a cinch. The larger the army, the more diverse its pool of failings—which made it easy to make short change¹⁸ of his troops.”

“Perhaps this behavior explains why Kiki Shikizaki entrusted you with this Mutant Blade. Or was it the sword that chose its owner...”

A sword does not choose who to kill.

But a sword will choose its owner.

Besides—the Garland had no blade to kill with.

“Since you said to ask as many as I wanted, here’s another. What kind of man was Kiki Shikizaki? I seem to remember you calling him your friend.”

The legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki.

The swordsmith who effectively reigned over the Age of Warring States.

And yet—his life story¹⁹ was shrouded in mystery.

“Yeah. How can I put this. He was a negative guy.”

“Negative?”

This word gave Togame pause—catching her attention.

You could say it rang a bell.

“Although I did call him a friend, that was forever ago—I’ve forgotten a great deal. What I can say is that through me, he perceived an abyss, or perhaps something abysmal?²⁰ Not the sort of thing you usually call a failing. That man—he had one of the oddest failings you’ll ever see. And in the end, he never faced it, simply rejected it and slipped away. Averting and closing his eyes, he forced me to accept Seito the Garland. As unwelcome a present as it gets,” Higaki said. “I tried my best to find someone I could pass it off to, but I was unable to locate an unassuming victim—and since I’m not trying to poison myself carrying that thing around, I buried it in the ground.”

“Did you bury it recently?”

“What?” asked Higaki. “No, just after the wars. This time, my dear Togame, I’m afraid that you’re mistaken. I buried it immediately after the wars ended.

Then a castle was built on top of it, and when the castle burned this place became Hyakkeijo—times change, huh.”

“...”

Incredible.

One of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki—had been buried under Hida Castle.

Hence what made—Takahito Hida realize.

That history was wrong.²¹

Taking a moment to herself, Togame put it all together.

Reconciling²² her long-forgotten memories—with this new information.

In the end.

This is why her father—took aim²³ on the Owari Bakufu.

Sacrificing so much.

Risking the lives of all his family and his comrades.

Taking aim—for the sake of history.

“Well, all matters of venom aside, by the time that he made this one here—”

Higaki pointed at Seito the Garland, which Togame was still holding.

“Kiki Shikizaki was pretty close to perfecting his vision of the Mutant Blades.”

“Perfecting? That’s an odd way of putting it, when the Twelve Possessed are said to be his masterpieces.”

“Wait. Don’t you know, Togame?”

Higaki cocked her head.

Her tone unchanged, dispassionate as ever.

Light—unemphatic.

“Togame—have you honestly been dragging around Yasuri without knowing what he is? I suppose you’re also unaware of why your sword is blessed with this ability to appraise the other Mutant Blades.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“At this rate, I should be asking you. It comes as a complete surprise that you know absolutely nothing of the sword that Shikizaki made after the test run²⁴ we call the Twelve Possessed. The last sword that he ever made. His magnum opus²⁵—Kyoto the Diamond.”

“Sh-Shichika?”

“Not Yasuri—so much as the entire Kyotoryu.”

The hermit’s words reminded Togame of something she had heard in the fourth moon of the year.

The words of the Sword Saint, Hakuhei Sabi.

Sabi called the Kyotoryu—a memento left by Kiki Shikizaki.

The Kiki Pedigree.

Whereas Sabi had called himself a reject.

At the time, Togame had been totally confused—but Sabi had assured her that the spirit²⁶ of his choice of words would become clear as she continued with her Sword Hunt.

In which case.

Perhaps this was the moment of clarity—!

“A matter of bloodlines as well as bloodshed.²⁷ But really—I must say I’m impressed that you could make it this far without knowing. Since you came armed with the Diamond, I assumed you were *qualified* to do so, but it seems that I was jumping to conclusions. Which led me to assume you could relieve me of the Garland...although I guess I was a bit confused. Whoa, what a rocky ride...but no harm done. Things worked out in the end.”

“Now that you mention it, Kiki Shikizaki and Kazune Yasuri, the founder of the Kyotoryu—were contemporaries.”

Both of whom had lorded over²⁸ the Age of Warring States.

In which case—perhaps the two of them had some kind of a connection. But did that mean that Kiki Shikizaki—played a role in the creation of the Kyotoryu?

The magnum opus—Kyoto the Diamond!

“Which is why—which is *precisely* why it has no blade,” Togame said.

“Seito the Garland was one of the last swords Shikizaki ever made—so I guess it makes sense...but my dear Togame, after making it this far without knowing, I doubt this information will change anything for you.”

“...”

Higaki was right.

Nothing was going to change—knowing the truth about Shichika and the origins of the Kyotoryu made no difference whatsoever.

Togame’s Sword Hunt was no more than a device.²⁹

No more than a means to an end.

A convenient means—for taking down her father’s foes.

However.

It was this Kyoto the Diamond who took the head of Takahito Hida; and this stubborn fact—

Could prompt an inexorable change in Togame.

Though it was too soon to understand in what manner.

“So, Seito the Garland...” Togame brought their conversation to a close—and stood. “Thank you kindly for allowing us to take it.”

“I’ve done nothing to deserve your thanks—if there’s anyone you should be thanking, it’s yourself.”

“Hah—listen to you. Shichika will be returning any minute—I should be going. I didn’t have time to fill the hole in. Hope that’s alright.”

“It’s fine, but why didn’t you fill it?”

“Because I didn’t have the time.”

“Oh really. I thought you might be planning to use it as your grave. I was worried you might ask me to bury you there when you die.”

“Thanks for the lesson.”

Togame stashed Seito the Garland in her kimono and turned away from Higaki, so that the hermit magus could not see her face when she continued.

“Thanks to you, I learned about a whole new kind of strategy. This lesson has broadened the scope of my scheming abilities immensely. The fact your battle was a draw has probably left Shichika a bit unsatisfied—but sometimes we must step over our frustrations, if it means reaching our goals.”

“Precisely—*wrong*, at least this time,” Higaki said indifferently. “Sometimes we must throw away our goals as well. That’s the lesson that you ought to learn

from all of this. Aspiration, ambition, vengeance—all of these are disposable, in the name of the true goal.”

“On that front, I have to disagree.”

Togame spoke without turning to face the hermit.

“I have abandoned everything except my goal—the goal I could never forsake.”

“I see that overcoming your failings has made you no less obstinate. Oh well—since that’s your nature, keep at it. There’s just one thing.”

Here, at the very end.

Rinne Higaki—had one more question for Togame the Schemer.

“What were your father’s last words?”

“Hah. What else?” Togame said without turning around. “What any father would tell his daughter—especially a daughter as lovable as me. It goes without saying, really.”

“Come on, spit it out.”

“I love you so much.”

Togame said it quietly.

“And here I am...thinking of him as my greatest failing.”

On her face, which the hermit could not see, was a faint, if also sad—

Smile.

¹ 草笛 KUSABUE “grass flute” making sounds using a piece of grass, as if playing recorder ² 絵空事 ESORAGOTO pipe dreams ³ 見計らって MI HAKARATTE watched for the right timing 計る HAKARU plan; measure ⁴ 従

僕 JŪBOKU manservant

⁵ ひねくれ者 HINEKURE MONO “twisted one” a difficult person ⁶ 測る HAKARU measure vs. 秤 HAKARI scale, also written 銚 HAKARI ⁷ 己自身 ONORE JISHIN “me myself and I”

⁸ ご名答 GOMEITŌ correct answer pun on 名刀 MEITŌ famous sword ⁹ 逆算 GYAKUSAN “reverse arithmetic”

¹⁰ そっくり SOKKURI entirely; spitting image ¹¹ 口は堅い KUCHI WA KATAI “my mouth is solid” able to keep a secret ¹² 逡巡 SHUNJUN indecisiveness ¹³ 存外 ZONGAI counterintuitive ¹⁴ 謎かけの答を訊く NAZOKAKE NO KOTAE WO KIKU ask for the answer to a riddle ¹⁵ 鷹揚に ŌYŌ NI “like a gliding hawk” with equipoise vs. 鷹比等 TAKAHITO, which shares 鷹 TAKA hawk ¹⁶ ご褒美 GOHŌBI reward

¹⁷ 大軍 TAIGUN “big military force”

¹⁸ 造作もない ZŌSA MO NAI require little effort ¹⁹ 全貌 ZENBŌ “complete visage”

²⁰ 深淵 深遠 SHIN’EN SHIN’EN “deep pool” “deep and far”

²¹ 歴史の歪み REKISHI NO YUGAMI history’s warp, crookedness ²² 合致 GACCHI bring into alignment ²³ 弓を引いた YUMI WO HIITA drew his bow ²⁴ 習作 SHŪSAKU “created for practice”

²⁵ 完了形変体刀 KANRYŌKEI HENTAITŌ “ultimate-form Mutant Blade”

²⁶ 真意 SHIN’I “true meaning”

²⁷ 血刀 KETTŌ bloody sword usu. CHIGATANA, alternative reading puns on 血統 KETTŌ pedigree ²⁸ 跋扈 BAKKO dominate

²⁹ 手段 SHUDAN step; expedient







EPILOGUE



The Sword Hunt for the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

Shichika emerged from his main fights along the way as follows.

Fight One, versus Komori Maniwa.

Victorious—winning move: Shichika Hachiretsu.

Fight Two, versus Ginkaku Uneri.

Victorious—winning move: Rakka Rozeki.

Fight Three, versus Meisai Tsuruga.

Victorious—winning move: Kyoka Suigetsu.

Fight Four, versus Hakuhei Sabi.

Victorious—winning move: Hyakka Ryoran.

Fight Five, versus Kanara Azekura.

Victorious—per referee.

Fight Six, versus Konayuki Itezora.

Defeated—per referee.

Fight Seven, versus Kyoken Maniwa.

Victorious—winning move: Hika Rakuyo.

Fight Eight, versus Nanami Yasuri.

Defeated—winning move: Hinageshi into Jinchoge.

Fight Nine, versus Nanami Yasuri.

Victorious—winning move: Tampopo.

Fight Ten, versus Skytron.

Victorious—per referee.

Fight Eleven, versus Zanki Kiguchi.

Defeated—winning move: hit to the wrist.

Fight Twelve, versus Zanki Kiguchi.

Victorious—winning move: hit to the face.

Fight Thirteen, versus Zanki Kiguchi.

Victorious—winning move: Hyakka Ryoran.

Fight Fourteen, versus Zanki Kiguchi.

Victorious—opponent surrendered.

Fight Fifteen, versus Rinne Higaki.

Draw—no winner.

In summary:

Fifteen fights, eleven wins, three defeats, one draw—

“So I’m one of the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki, huh?”

On the road home from Hyakkeijo—

Around the time they reached the border between Mutsu and Dewa, Shichika finally wrapped his head around the explanation that Togame the Schemer had given him. He looked up at the sky and muttered.

“That means the thousand Mutant Blades, including the Twelve Possessed that the Old Shogun failed to capture, were only practice for making me, his final sword and magnum opus—I hear what you’re saying, but I gotta admit it doesn’t really click for me.”

“Strictly speaking, his magnum opus isn’t you per se, but the entire Kyotoryu—whereby the founder of your school, Kazune Yasuri, as well as your father, Mutsue Yasuri...and even Nanami Yasuri, though she be something of an exception, collectively form Kyoto the Diamond.”

“I wonder—I have a weird feeling about this. Besides, this is all according to that pesky kid Rinne Higaki, right? What if it’s just a stupid lie and she’s just messing with your head?”

“You’re right about her being pesky—she’s a pain alright, always saying the most random things. That said, my father was never one to lie simply to be annoying.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. When he wanted to be annoying, he told the truth.”

Togame and Shichika continued down the highway, side by side.

Their hope was to return again to Owari.

“I dunno, Togame, I still have this funny feeling. I appreciate the explanation for why I have a sixth sense for the Mutant Blades. That clicks for me,¹ but so what? Who cares, right?”

“It must be nice to be happy-go-lucky—but don’t forget to hurt a little. Though perhaps you’re fine as you are...”

“What if this thing where I, and no one in the Kyotoryu, can swing a sword to save our life is all because we’re cursed by Kiki Shikizaki? Or in the words of Sabi, *bound to him*... Well, Togame? What next? If we head back to Owari, the Princess will probably just send us on our way again.”

“In that case, I’ll stop and hatch a scheme. That is, if Princess Negative gives us an indication² of the whereabouts of the last two Shikizaki blades.”

“Hmm. Last two, huh.”

Two swords remained.

Dokuto the Basilisk. Ento the Bead.

At present, neither Togame the Schemer nor Shichika Yasuri had the foggiest idea of where the two swords were, or who it was that owned them—

“Does that mean you’ve almost realized your ambition?”

“Hard to say. That hermit magus might try teaching me another lesson if we start talking about ambition or goals again.”

Rinne Higaki.

When Shichika returned, the girl had disappeared.

Literally³—without a trace.

Perhaps this meant his failings, as well as Togame's, had gone with her.

"Another thing, Shichika...about the sword we shipped back to Owari from our last inn, Seito the Garland. While I found the concept of a swordless sword, comprising but a hilt and handguard, captivating on its own, it reminded me a little of our experience with the Cured... Don't you think it was a little bit too easy to capture?"

"Nah, it just means that hermit wanted us to have the Garland, right?"

"Perhaps you're right. However—since holding the sword makes you want to kill, but all the venom is directed back at you, its function as a sword is topsy-turvy."⁴

"If holding it makes you want to cut yourself...maybe that's why it has no blade. I'm starting to see why that hermit kept it buried underground...and what was up with that woman—I mean, was she even a woman? That's just how she appeared to you and me."

"Hmm. As a hermit magus, perhaps she has transcended⁵ gender—whoever she was, she's certainly not someone I'd like to see again. But enough about Higaki, our focus now is Kiki Shikizaki. What drove the legendary swordsmith to create the Mutant Blades, the Twelve Possessed, and then finally his magnum opus? What was the Old Shogun's actual motive for trying to hunt down all the Mutant Blades...and what caused him to fail? Last month, I touched upon these questions with you, but I think it's about time that I thought long and hard about these things."

"That sounds like a lot to think about. Why not hold off until we've rounded up the last two of the Twelve Possessed?"

"Out of the question—we need to beat them to the punch before they even

make a fist. It's best to finish counting your chickens as far ahead of them hatching as possible."

"Hmm."

Kiki Shikizaki.

The Old Shogun.

Princess Negative and Emonzaemon Soda.

And of course the Maniwa...

There were a lot of things to think about.

Thinking about these things was up to Togame, not Shichika, but then, from a different perspective, he could not exactly separate himself from everything.

Namely.

Rounding up the last two swords—meant that his journey with Togame would be ending.

This trip that felt like it would last forever—was almost done.

More than the origins of the Kyotoryu or anything else.

This fact occupied his thoughts.

Once the journey was over—what would Togame do with him?

What would become of Shichika Yasuri—the son of her father's immediate adversary?

"Although," said Togame, "I'll have to do some thinking about the Basilisk and the Bead as well. I have absolutely no idea what kind of sword the Bead might be...but I'm not without a sense of what to expect from the Basilisk. Judging by the name,⁶ I suspect it is the polar opposite of Oto the Cured, which has the

power to detoxify.”

“What’s the use in spending your time guessing? That’s what got me into such deep trouble when we were going after the Twin—but the polar opposite of Oto the Cured, huh?”

Shichika realized they were now entering Dewa.

“Since we’re already here, how about swinging by Shogi Village on the way home?”

“Why?” asked Togame.

Her face not so much serious—as expressionless.

The menace in her eyes made Shichika falter.⁷

“What reason would we have to stop? So you could see Zanki Kiguchi? Eh?”

“‘Eh’?”

“Cheerio!”

She slugged him in the gut.

If he had flexed his abs, Togame would have hurt her fist, so Shichika took the full brunt of her attack, which packed much more of a punch than he anticipated—her excavation project must have toned her skinny arms.

Unnecessarily...

“Incredible. I can understand Konayuki, with her monstrous strength, and Nanami, staggering genius that she is, but I find it seriously unsettling that you would count Kiguchi as a weakness, when all she did to beat you was follow the rules.”

“Your jealousy is out of control.”

“Another thing—Higaki mentioned this as well. I get why you would see your sister as a failing, but it comes as something of a surprise that you wouldn’t feel the same way toward Mutsue Yasuri. To be honest, I figured you, like me, felt inferior⁸ to your father.”

“Hmm. Not so much for me. Actually, I’m kind of surprised about how hung up you are about your father. Since you’re plotting to avenge his death and all, I would have thought you’d be bursting with love⁹ for him.”

“Nothing strange about a little family feud.¹⁰ Not in my family—and not in yours. The tribe of Kyoto the Diamond... Nanami touched upon this, didn’t she—maybe she knew something?”

“I don’t know.”

“I know you don’t. If you did know, this story would have been a whole lot shorter... Anyway, we’re not stopping at Shogi Village. We need to hurry back to Owari.”

“Aren’t you being a little obstinate?”

“Not in my book.”

On that Togame was firm.

But she had more to say.

“And another thing—I may as well divulge the reason why my father started the Rebellion in the first place.”

“Reason? Wasn’t it just that the Owari Bakufu was too sleepy¹¹ for him? That’s why he harbored his ambitions to unify the land—”

“Right, that too—but it was mostly about history.”

“History?”

“Yeah. Now I remember what he said to me. This is about history. Fixing a history that is all wrong—or exposing it as being wrong. My father said those things to me—but I was just a little girl. I failed to fully comprehend the meaning of his words, and have no choice but to fill the blanks myself. But in light of the fact that one of the Twelve Possessed was buried beneath Hida Castle—”

Then.

As she uttered these words—both of them stopped.

The passion of the conversation was not to blame.

Shichika and Togame were accustomed to talking as they walked—so why stop?

Because something was blocking the way.

Before their eyes—a child lay facedown in the road.

“Hey. You alive?” called out Shichika, dashing over to the child—Togame, though not quite dashing over, didn’t miss a beat either.

They turned the child over, so that he faced the sky.

It was a boy, not even ten years old.

“He’s alive—or seems to be. Oh, wait—he’s hurt.”

Saying the boy was hurt—was a gross understatement.

His chest had been slashed open and was oozing blood.

Without question—his wound was from a sword.¹²

“Don’t shake him. Just set him gently on the ground. Careful with his wounds,” Togame warned Shichika before he could try anything.

Not so very long ago, shake was exactly what he’d done to her.

“Okay.”

Shichika did as he was told. Over his shoulder, Togame gazed at the boy.

“Huh? He’s—”

“Hel—”

It seemed the boy was conscious, however barely. From the size of the gash, Shichika had taken it for granted he had passed out—

“H-Help... Help.”

The boy could barely form a sentence.

He spoke in a faint voice, without looking at Shichika.

“Help...please help.”

“Shh, I understand. Stop talking. Here, drink some water—it looks like you’ve stopped bleeding...but we should probably disinfect¹³ it.”

“N-No... T-Too late for me. Too late.”

Sleeveless ninja garb.

Those peculiar chains encircling his body.

The boy.

Pengin Maniwa—pleaded to Shichika.

“Hurry—please help Hohoh.”

The Schemer and the Maniwa.

Their fraught relationship, at times friendly, at others hostile—was nearing its conclusion.

Seito the Garland: Check

End of Book Ten

To Be Continued

¹ 腑に落ちた FU NI OCHITA “fell to the intestines” digested ² 示唆 SHISA hint ³ 文字通り MOJIDŌRI “to the letter”

⁴ 本末は顛倒 HONMATSU WA TENTŌ the “essential/inessential” turned upside down ⁵ 超越 CHŌETSU surpass ⁶ 毒刀 鍍 DOKUTŌ MEKKI “The Poison Katana: Plating”

⁷ たじろぐ TAJIROGU flinch ⁸ 劣等意識 RETTŌ ISHIKI inferiority complex ⁹ 愛情一杯 AIJŌ IPPAI brimming with affection ¹⁰ 親子間の確執 OYAKOKAN NO KAKUSHITSU parent-child conflict, antagonism ¹¹ ぬるさ NURUSA tepid ¹² 刀傷 KATANA KIZU “katana injury”

¹³ 消毒 SHŌDOKU “extinguish venom”



AGE	Three Hundred (self-reported)
OCCUPATION	Saint
AFFILIATION	None
STATUS	Hermit
POSSESSED	Seito the Garland
HEIGHT	4' 2" (based on appearance)
WEIGHT	74 lbs. (based on appearance)
HOBBY	Playing reeds

LIST OF
SPECIAL MOVES

SELF-AWARENESS	(PERPETUALLY ACTIVE)
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CHARACTER
INDEX 10

RINNE HIGAKI

I thought I might discuss how every human being has their share of failings, and how hard these failings are to overcome, but at the end of the day, that sort of thing is pretty obvious, so there's no use making a big solemn speech about it here. Instead, let's talk about memory. As I grow older, I've had no shortage of opportunities to be reminded of how insanely unreliable our memories are...something I didn't even think I needed a reminder of. Whether we're crazy busy or plagued with boredom, we still manage to steer headfirst into the barriers of memory, which places it among life's other uncanny mysteries. Unprompted, we remember things we've totally forgotten, and in the blink of an eye we totally forget things we were certain we would never forget, as well as things we know we should never forget, while memories we wish with all our might we could forget, the things it pains us to remember, hold fast to the inside of our skulls, refusing to budge. So it goes. I personally find the last of these the most nefarious. I used to always think about how nice it would be if we could forget things on command. The way we delete data from a hard drive. Perhaps our faculties are simply unequipped to remember all the things we wish we could remember forever, but the opposite, oblivion, seems possible enough, if we're willing to put in the time. I guess that's what they do in hypnotherapy. But I don't think we're at the point as human beings where we can shape our memories however we like (nor should we try). Our brains administer our memories on our behalf, remembering what they deem necessary to remember, while what they deem unnecessary gets sealed in the deep recesses of our minds. Sometimes I wish I could file a complaint with my

brain about the criteria it uses to select things. I'd make it stop deciding on its own what is and isn't necessary to remember. But apart from forgetting things we ought to remember and being unable to forget what we ought to forget, there's another fearsome option known as "misremembering." What exactly are our brains thinking when they do that? I wish the two of us could sit down sometime and sort these things out.

This marks the close of the tenth book of the epic novel *Sword Tale*. Now that Book Ten is complete, I can just barely see the finish line ahead of me, but the homestretch won't be easy, so I'll have to keep chugging along and hoping for the best. The fact that Togame the Schemer and Shichika Yasuri have only two more months together on their Sword Hunt makes me want to give it all I've got. What's going to happen to them now? I almost want to finish things with Book Eleven and fill Book Twelve exclusively with *take's* awesome illustrations, but regardless of what happens, that's all I have for *Sword Tale—Book Ten: Seito the Garland*.

Two books left!

NISIOISIN



BOOK ELEVEN



DOKUTO
THE BASILISK

毒刀

第十一話

毒刀・鍍



序章

一章——粗筋

二章——断罪円

三章——東海道

四章——柔球術

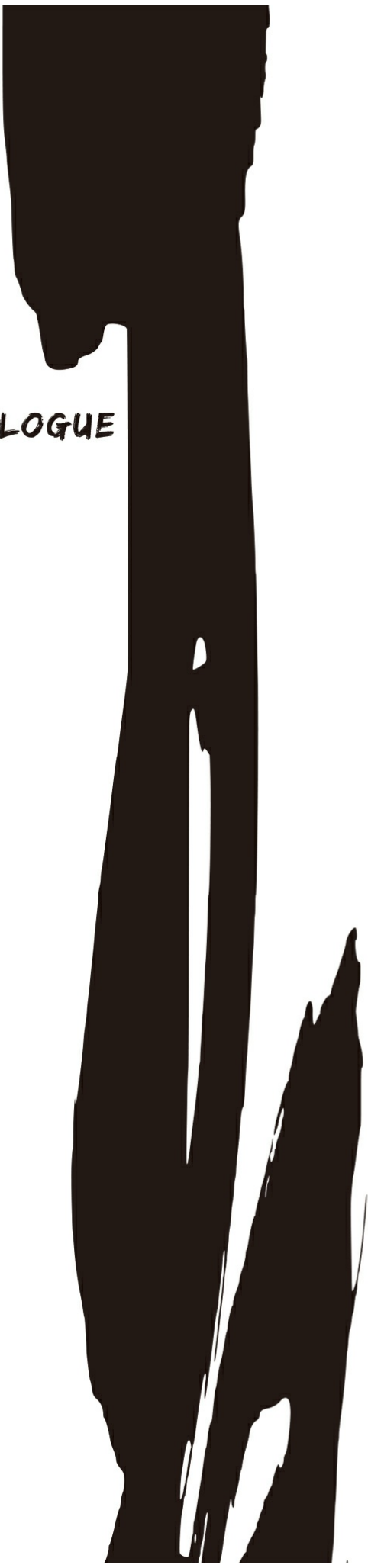
五章——四季嶺記紀

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画：竹
脚本：半田弘史
版：及川、長瀬、アキラ
構成：紺野、慎二（凸版印刷）
本文：展覧会、ドット、装幀、明、アキラ



The original Book Eleven Table of contents spread



PROLOGUE



This was several hundred years ago.

When the land was in chaos, during the Age of Warring States.

Long, long ago.

In a place called Tango.

Deep in the mountains, a far cry from the Capital, a young warrior stood all alone, swinging a sword with total focus.¹

Fit and muscular.

His sword, too, had the gleam of a fine piece.

The young warrior was silent, swinging his blade again and again—if you looked closely, it appeared that he was trying to slash the leaves as they fell from the trees around him. A worthy effort if there ever was one—however, the warrior was unable to successfully cut through even a single leaf.

The word *practice* is far too gentle to suffice.

Same goes for the word *training*.

This was different—this was *religious*.²

In this chaotic era, when there was always a battle being waged somewhere in the world—the warrior had chosen to retreat into solitude, so he could focus

exclusively on honing his own skills, deep in the mountains where no one could distract him.

Call it discipline—or call it irresponsible.

“So rudimentary.”³

In these mountains where no one could distract him—a man approached the warrior.

Out of nowhere.

Suddenly behind him, the man casually addressed the warrior, as if they had known one another for a dozen years.

“This is child’s play—it’s a wonder you can even swing a sword.”

“ ... ”

The warrior did not turn around.

And just continued swinging his sword, as if he had not heard or noticed him.

When the warrior did not turn, the man did not appear concerned.

“Let’s put it this way,” he continued. “You’re a tenderfoot⁴—when it comes to swordplay. I’ll go ahead and say you have no talent whatsoever. You have no aptitude; your form is awful...and worst of all, I don’t think you have the guts⁵ to kill.”

“ ... ”

The warrior would not turn around.

“You could cut through thousands upon thousands of those leaves, but it would never make you any stronger—if you want to make any progress as a swordsman, you’ll need to start by cutting people down. The sword is a

weapon. Meant to kill. Which is why a swordsman must kill at least three hundred—before he even calls himself a novice.⁶ And here you are,” the man said, “unable to cut a single leaf.”

The warrior registered no reaction.

By now the man was getting fed up.⁷

“When I heard there was a promising young warrior hiding in the mountains, devoted day and night to honing his abilities, I trekked far afield from the Capital, despite my busy schedule—and what do I find but a runt like you—ugh. I must be losing my edge⁸—ramping things up from my masterworks to my magnum opus has got me acting hastily, out of character.”

“Masterworks? Magnum Opus?”

When the man stiffly⁹ scratched his head and twisted his torso—the warrior stopped swinging his sword and turned around, as if the man had finally caught his interest.

Who was this guy?

Dressed in light clothes hardly fit for a hike deep into the mountains, he carried almost nothing on his person.

The warrior glanced down at his sword.

He knew not why this man was here—if he could be trusted, he was simply here to visit him—but if they came to blows, the warrior was the one armed with a sword, which gave him the advantage.

Thus was his judgment of the circumstances.

And as if reading the young warrior’s mind—

“Give up, tenderfoot.”

The man told him who was boss.

“Every sword across the land is on my side—nay, every sword across the land is working under me. Your pitiful ineptitude aside, that sword would never lay a scratch on me.”

“What’s this about your masterworks and magnum opus?” the warrior asked, ignoring the man’s comment.

Glaring at the man.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like—what part don’t you understand? I guess for a novice such as yourself, my masterworks are way out of your league, not to mention my magnum opus.”

“I’m well aware that my swordplay has a long way to go,” the warrior said. “That’s why I’m out here, training like crazy.”

“Like crazy? While I commend your dedication—you better hurry, tenderfoot. Pretty soon—the wars will pass you by.”

“Huh?”

“Not like you would have a clue, shut off from the world out in these mountains—but the conditions¹⁰ out there have changed considerably from what you used to know.”

“Who cares about conditions.”

“Excuse me?”

“My only interest is honing my abilities—taking my study of swordplay to the extreme. Whether this be an age of war or peace has no influence on my path.”

“Hahaha.”

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, though I must say your dedication truly is commendable—and on top of that, I’m quite taken by your disinterest in the happenings of the world. I almost thought I was wasting my time...but I guess this means you pass the test, however barely,” said the man. “To be honest, I have no interest in the world myself—if anything, I prefer to dabble in a little thing called history, in the broad scheme of which the things that we refer to as society or the world are merely a façade,¹¹ strictly the surface.”

“History? Huh?”

The warrior frowned.

“What the heck—I’ve barely understood a word you’ve said since you arrived. You some kind of megalomaniac¹² or what?”

“That accusation is not entirely mistaken—to most people out there, I suppose I am. Which is precisely why I must keep up the fight—though things are sure to go wrong soon enough. Blame a lack of access to materials—but nothing I can do about that.”

“Materials?”

“That’s right. Without materials, how’s a guy supposed to make his swords? Now, where was I? I’d say you passed, though barely squeaking by. Or wait, you wanted to know what I meant about my masterworks and magnum opus?”

“Not necessarily.”

The warrior shook his head, as if developing a distaste for the man’s elusive manner of speaking, which grew more puzzling the more they spoke. Perhaps he was regretting he had ever turned around.

“At this point, I could care less—would you please let me be? I have a lot of things I gotta do. I haven’t crossed off¹³ half of my program for the day.”

“By program, are you referring to your ineffectual training regimen? It’s like I told you, tenderfoot—if you want to progress as a swordsman, you need to start by cutting people down.”

“Kill at least three hundred—before I call myself a novice?” the warrior asked the man, who seemed ready to repeat himself. “You make it sound like you’re a role model¹⁴... If I want to be a model of a man, how many do I have to kill?”

“Hard to say. *These days*, I’m not sure we have any model swordsmen to point to...just a bunch of third-rate chumps who can’t handle the swords I make.”

“The swords—you make?”

“Huh? Didn’t I just say that?” the man asked.

Grandiloquent in tone.

“I’m not a swordsman—I’m a swordsmith.”

“S-Swordsmith?”

“I used to be a fortuneteller,¹⁵ but it stopped paying the bills—enough about me, though. Let’s talk about you, tenderfoot. I’m going to see to it that your painful efforts come to fruition.¹⁶ That said, it’s up to you whether your roots take hold,¹⁷ Kazune Yasuri—”

This was a few centuries ago.

When the land was in chaos, during the Age of Warring States.

Long, long ago.

Thus was the advent of the relationship between Kazune Yasuri, who would go on to establish the Kyotoryu—and Kiki Shikizaki, who at this point was already a living legend.



Togame the Schemer devised the plan.

And Shichika Yasuri put it into practice.

Their quest for the Twelve Possessed of legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki—the Sword Hunt launched at the beginning of the year, is passing through its latter stages, fast approaching denouement.¹⁸

Zetto the Leveler, check! Zanto the Razor, check! Sento the Legion, check!

Hakuto the Whisper, check! Zokuto the Armor, check! Soto the Twin, check!

Akuto the Eel, check! Bito the Sundial, check! Oto the Cured, check!

Seito the Garland, check!

Among the Twelve Possessed—two remain!

Dokuto the Basilisk!

Ento the Bead!

This late in the game, no need for declarations or fanfare!

Let's unroll the scroll of this war of katanas!

This sanguinary, slipshod period piece!

Book Eleven of the Sword Tale ♪

¹ 一心不乱 ISSHIN FURAN “one heart, undisturbed”

² 修行 SHUGYŌ monastic asceticism

³ ちょろい CHOROI weak, easily defeated

⁴ 小僧 KOZŌ “little monk” child

⁵ 気概 KIGAI spirit, mettle

⁶ 半人前 HAN’NIN MAE “half a person” beginner

⁷ 鼻白んだ HANAJIRONDA “white-nosed” (from lack of blood) scrunching one’s nose to show displeasure

⁸ 焼きが回った YAKI GA MAWATTA overheating (a sword) during quenching; declining in acuity (with age)

⁹ ぼりぼり BORI BORI onomatopoeia for cracking or abrasion

¹⁰ 戦況 SENKYŌ war situation

¹¹ 上澄み UWAZUMI the clear uppermost portion of a liquid in which any solids have begun to settle

¹² 誇大妄想狂 KODAIMŌSŌKYŌ “madness of exaggerated hallucinations”

¹³ 消化 SHŌKA digest (food); meet (quota)

¹⁴ 一人前 ICHININ MAE “full person” a grownup; a pro

15 占い師 URANAISHI augurer by trade

16 花実を咲かす HANAMI WO SAKASU “bear flower and fruit” allusion to
七花 SHICHIKA “Seventh Flower” and 七実 NANAMI “Seventh Fruit”

17 根っこ NEKKO radicle (of a plant) allusion to 一根 KAZUNE “First Root”

18 最終段階 SAISHŪ DANKAI “final steps”



CHAPTER ONE
THE RECAP



This time around, we'll recap what's happened thus far from the vantage point of Shichika.

Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu.

Turning twenty-four this year.

Yet of his twenty-four years, he remembered little of the first four—not like he was unable to recall, not like he had forgotten; he had simply not retained the details.

For Shichika, life began on a certain desert island, nominally part of Tango.

Around twenty years earlier—when his father, Mutsue Yasuri, Sixth Master of the Kyotoryu, found himself banished to the place that they would later call Haphazard Island, Shichika and his older sister, Nanami Yasuri, were dragged along.

That was the day his life began.

The precepts of the Kyotoryu—and battle.

On rainy days and windy days and snowy days and stormy days—these things were hammered into him, through personal instruction from his father.

The Kyotoryu.

The swordless school of swordplay, forsaking every type of blade.

A discipline¹ in which the body is treated like a sword and honed to a keen edge—in the confines of that desert island, Shichika was raised to be the Seventh Master.

The late Rebellion.

Spurred by Takahito Hida, Kaoyaku of Oshu, this was essentially the only battle to take place during this age of peace and order—the conflict quelled by his late father, once dubbed a hero of the war, by whom Shichika was trained morning, noon, and night.

Training so much he had no time to think of anything else.

As a result, even in the years following those first four, where his memory began, it was as if his life as such was nil.²

Training, training, and more training.

None of the things which normally make up a life.

Special mention should be made here of the genius on the sidelines of this lifestyle that was not what most would call a life—for Shichika had a sister, three years older, named Nanami Yasuri, who was a monster of a genius, or perhaps a genius of a monster, and whose constant presence must have impacted his personality immensely.

If Shichika was made of effort, then Nanami was made of genius.

The Hero of the Rebellion, Mutsue Yasuri, feared her genius so much that he chose Shichika, not Nanami, to be the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu—and when Shichika came to realize this had happened, his heart of hearts was anything but serene.

Yet the difference in skill between Nanami and Shichika was beyond absolute.

This way of life lasted for nineteen years.

Continuing for nineteen years—uneventfully and dependably.³

Shichika Yasuri, Mutsue Yasuri, and Nanami Yasuri all adapted to this lifestyle, as if it were perfectly natural—for Shichika, being coached by his father came more naturally than breathing; while for Mutsue, coaching his son came more naturally than breathing; and for Nanami, secretly watching the both of them came more naturally than breathing—all three of them, the hero and the next master and the genius, took for granted that this lifestyle would go on for another nineteen years, and another nineteen after that, ad infinitum. But just then.⁴

Something happened.

Mutsue Yasuri realized that Nanami Yasuri's genius, or genius capacity, was developing even further—although he only realized due to Shichika's lack of discretion.

Nanami made no effort to hide her genius from her hard-working younger brother—one might call this an uncharacteristic indiscretion on her part as well, though she was caught totally unawares. Why would she expect her genius to be *sufficient reason*—for her father to attempt to murder⁵ his own daughter?

One night.

When Nanami was fast asleep, Mutsue tried to strangle her to death, without relying on the Kyotoryu—and when Shichika realized what was happening, he killed his father to save Nanami.

It was a fight between the Kyotoryu.

His genius sister made no attempt to intervene⁶—watching the two of them

battle in the same manner she had always watched them practice.

Simply watching.

Though lauded as Hero of the Rebellion, at this point Mutsue was past his prime⁷—and by the age of twenty-three, Shichika Yasuri had already surpassed his father, both in brute force and in repertoire.

Hence—Shichika managed to kill Mutsue.

Thus, through this abnormal sequence of events, Mutsue Yasuri lost his life, and in the process Shichika succeeded him as Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu.

Their life as a family of three on that desert island became a life shared between siblings.

With the death of Mutsue Yasuri, the one who had been banished here a criminal, Shichika and Nanami had no reason to remain there on the island—but like their father, the two of them were resolved to live out their lives⁸ on Haphazard Island.

Especially Shichika—who chose to suffer the same fate as the Kyotoryu, and turn to rust.

For him, there was no other option.

Lacking the war record of his father or the genius of his sister—he had nothing but the Kyotoryu.

“Listen, Shichika.”

At some point or another, his sister Nanami gave it to him straight.

“To be perfectly honest, I think you’re a fool—to waste your time working so hard. I respect effort itself. You and Dad working so hard, like it was nothing, is something I instinctively⁹ admire. That’s why I can’t sit back and watch effort

going to waste. It's too much."

Shichika talked back to her.

Defiant for a change.

"If I'm wasting my effort, aren't you wasting your genius, sis?"

The turning point came one year later.

In the first moon¹⁰ of the following year.

Haphazard Island—so small it was not even listed on the map, enjoyed its first new visitor in quite some time.

Bedizened in two dozen layers of brash and brilliant finery.

White hair the likes of which they'd never seen, completely without pigment.¹¹

Armed—with a sword.

The first real sword that Shichika, though swordsman he may be, had seen in all his life. In actuality, it was extremely rare for this woman to wear a sword—that was how frantic she was feeling; though at the time, Shichika had no way of knowing this.

The woman said that she had come to Haphazard Island seeking Mutsue.

When Shichika said his father was dead and introduced himself as the present master, the woman didn't skip a beat.

"I see," she said. "You have a nice build. You're in good shape. I'd say you pass muster."

She continued.

"My business remains with the master of your school. Which means, young

master, that my business with your father is now with you—”

The woman introduced herself as Togame the Schemer. Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu—being her full title.

She came here on a sword hunt.

In plain terms, that was the business she referred to.

The legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki had effectively reigned over the Age of Warring States—and the swords that he created were called the Mutant Blades.

One thousand in total.

Among which the Owari Bakufu currently held nine hundred and eighty-eight.

Which left twelve Mutant Blades.

Yet these twelve swords were more than a handful.

Zetto the Leveler.

Zanto the Razor.

Sento the Legion.

Hakuto the Whisper.

Zokuto the Armor.

Soto the Twin.

Akuto the Eel.

Bito the Sundial.

Oto the Cured.

Seito the Garland.

Dokuto the Basilisk.

Ento the Bead.

These were the most sophisticated, refined, and masterfully designed of all the Mutant Blades produced by Kiki Shikizaki—twelve swords.

The Twelve Possessed, his masterworks.

The swords not even the first leader to unite the nation—the Old Shogun, as he is known today, had been able to collect, for all his might. The nine hundred and eighty-eight Mutant Blades currently held by the Owari Bakufu represented the total of what the Old Shogun managed to capture—but these last twelve evaded even him.

Togame the Schemer asked¹² the Kyotoryu to round up these twelve swords for her.

To justify why she would launch this risky sword hunt now, amid these times of peace and order, with the late Rebellion only a faint memory—the Schemer offered a variety of reasons, but Shichika failed to grasp the logic of her explanation.

Or rather, the very concept of logic was beyond him—

He wasn't really interested.

Brought up on that desert island, Shichika was a mellow guy.

Little of what the Schemer told him sank in¹³—or, rather, perhaps some of it sank in, but not enough to make him want to leave the island.

What got through to Shichika was not the words Togame the Schemer used—but her heart.

That was enough to make him leave the island.

The Kyotoryu, swept into a corner of history in this age of peace and order—was able to go back into the world.

The trajectory of their Sword Hunt for the Twelve Possessed was not without its unwelcome surprises—but they had managed to round up one sword after another.

In the first moon, Zetto the Leveler.

Wresting the hardest sword in all the world, Zetto the Leveler, from Komori Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan, who had come to Haphazard Island seeking information on the Sword Hunt from Togame the Schemer.

In the second moon, Zanto the Razor.

Wresting the sharpest sword in all the world, Zanto the Razor, from Ginkaku Uneri, a master of iainuki, who was holed up in a room of Gekoku Castle, the only person who insisted on living in the harsh climate of Inaba Desert.

In the third moon, Sento the Legion.

Wresting the most myriad sword in all the world, Sento the Legion, from Meisai Tsuruga, Mistress of Triad Shrine in Izumo, who looked after the thousand Kuromiko and practiced the Sentoryu, in some ways the polar opposite of the Kyotoryu.

In the fourth moon, Hakuto the Whisper.

Wresting the frailest sword in all the world, Hakuto the Whisper, from Hakuhei Sabi, the Fallen Swordsman, who lost the cherished title Strongest Swordsman in Japan on Ganryu Island in Suo, a holy site where once a man bearing a greatsword and another bearing two fought what has since been

called a holy battle.

In the fifth moon, Zokuto the Armor.

Winning a one-on-one match¹⁴ against Kanara Azeкура, one of the pirates based out of Dakuon Harbor in Satsuma, from whom they wrested the toughest sword in all the world, Zokuto the Armor.

In the sixth moon, Soto the Twin.

Wresting the heaviest sword in all the world, Soto the Twin, from Konayuki Itezora—a girl of monstrous strength, and sole survivor of the Itezora Clan, who once populated the Level One Disaster Area of Mt. Odori in Ezo.

In the seventh moon, Akuto the Eel.

Wresting the wickedest sword in all the world, Akuto the Eel, from the genius Nanami Yasuri, who had left Haphazard Island in pursuit of Shichika and fell to him at Seiryoin Gokenji Temple in Tosa, one of the holy sites for swordsmen, alongside Ganryu Island, and shelter of the Katana Buddha, wielded as a pretext by the Old Shogun in his sword hunt.

In the eighth moon, Bito the Sundial.

Wresting the most humanoid sword in all the world, Bito the Sundial, from the mechanical sentry known as Skytron, who patrolled¹⁵ Lake Fuyo in Edo, a Level One Disaster Area like Mt. Odori in Ezo, thus capturing Skytron itself, for this owner of the Twelve Possessed was both robot and katana.

In the ninth moon, Oto the Cured.

Wresting the most innocuous sword in all the world, Oto the Cured, from Zanki Kiguchi, the embodiment of solemnity, and the Twelfth Master of the Heartland School, a discipline of swordplay intent on giving life that had been

handed down for generations in Shogi Village—the holy land of shogi players—in Tendo, in Dewa.

In the tenth moon, Seito the Garland.

Wresting the sincerest sword in all the world from Rinne Higaki, a hermit magus and acquaintance of Kiki Shikizaki, in Mutsu, Oshu—at Hyakkeijo, the site of Hida Castle, where Takahito Hida, the Kaoyaku of Oshu, once resided with his family, and where almost everyone associated with him had been put to death.

Ten swords in total.

Though suffering vicissitudes—they had captured ten of the Twelve Possessed.

Accessing knowledge.

Accessing feelings.

Though prepared for the worst, their journey was proceeding steadily.

Granted,¹⁶ a few concerns remained.

For one thing, the Maniwa Ninja Clan, that band of expert assassins who were conducting a sword hunt of their own.

For another, Princess Negative, sworn enemy of Togame the Schemer and Inspector General of the Yanari Shogunate, Owari Bakufu, along with her confidant, Lieutenant Emonzaemon Soda.

And then the lessons—of Oto the Cured and Seito the Garland.

What they had learned through rounding up these two swords reshaped¹⁷ their entire concept of the Sword Hunt going forward—not to say their impression of the Sword Hunt as experienced thus far.

Two swords remained.

Dokuto the Basilisk.

Ento the Bead.

In both cases, Shichika expected to discover them in little time at all—an assumption that the Schemer might deride as being overly optimistic. Nevertheless, he had been thinking about what would happen after the Sword Hunt ended. He had been thinking of this all along—but recently the thoughts had drastically increased in frequency.

The end of a journey.

When his journey with the Schemer was over—what would he do with himself, when he was no longer her sword?

What would become of him?

What would Togame the Schemer—*do with him?*

The Schemer had enlisted the Kyotoryu for the duration of the Sword Hunt—but what use would she have for the Kyotoryu when it was over?

He didn't know.

Or rather, didn't want to know.

He didn't want to think about it.

Reason being: for Togame the Schemer, the Kyotoryu was inextricable from Mutsue Yasuri, Shichika's father and Hero of the Rebellion, who murdered her own father, Takahito Hida, the Kaoyaku of Oshu—and that made it the bane of her existence.¹⁸

“So, what’ll we do next?”

“Don’t ask me,” Togame the Schemer, Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu, replied—with a shrug of consternation, to Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu.

They were in Dewa, staying at an inn.

In a room on the second floor.

Sitting, facing one another, across a futon unrolled in the middle of the room upon which lay—

A boy.

Sleeping soundly—or perhaps more aptly, sleeping so heavily¹⁹ he almost looked like he was dead.

He was alive, however barely.

But from the looks of him, you would have thought that he was dead.

“If this kid can be trusted—we can’t stay here forever. Since he was not mortally wounded,²⁰ he’ll probably recover. We should depart as soon as possible.”

“Yeah,” Shichika nodded. “I’m not sure how I feel²¹ about that—it feels real fishy.²² It could easily be yet another trap.”

“True, considering who he is, that’s not out of the question.”

“I had my doubts about this from the start.”

Shichika pointed at the boy sleeping between them.

“Could this kid—really be a Maniwac?”

“I’ll vouch for that,” Togame told him, nodding. “He’s one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan—Penguin Maniwa, of Fish Unit. He and I have met before. I’m positive... Of the Twelve Bosses, he was feared more than any other, next to Hohoh Maniwa.”

“This little guy? Hard to see it, from the looks of him.”

“I don’t know anything about his ninpo. Though by one account,²³ it is said to surpass even that of Hohoh—hmm.”

“Is that right...”

Even with this confirmation from Togame, Shichika was skeptical.

Then again, if it was true—

That fearsome ninja—in his current state and physical condition?

It was scary enough on its own.

If the story this kid Penguin Maniwa had given them was true—

“...”

This had begun the previous month.

On the road home from Hyakkeijo, the site of Hida Castle in Mutsu, Oshu, where they received Seito the Garland from the hermit magus known as Rinne Higaki.

The road home—to Owari.

It happened after crossing over from Mutsu into Dewa.

Penguin Maniwa was lying facedown in the road ahead of them.

When Shichika sat him up, they realized Penguin had been slashed across the chest. An outrageous wound which could easily have proven fatal²⁴—though miraculously, the slash had missed his vital organs.

This was no normal gash.

But before Shichika had a chance to realize that this boy's appearance—his sleeveless ninja garb, the chains wrapped around his body, signified a particular allegiance; and before Togame the Schemer realized the boy was in fact Penguin Maniwa—he told them something.

“Please help Hohoh.”

And with that—Penguin lost consciousness.

As goes without saying, Togame the Schemer and the Maniwa were bitter rivals—though they had been the first party whom she called upon to join the Sword Hunt she had personally planned and devised.

A Maniwa Boss by the name of Komori Maniwa, her partner for a time, had done a splendid job of rounding up Zetto the Leveler, only to betray her forthwith.²⁵

As a result, Togame had found herself in quite the fix²⁶—and when she was betrayed again, this time by Hakuhei Sabi, back then the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, it only added insult to the injury of the betrayal of the Maniwa.





Togame had a tendency, which Shichika had witnessed time and again, to lose her cool the second she beheld a Maniwa Boss. He would have thought the boy's affiliation with the Maniwa would be enough for her to refuse to help him in the first place—

But after all, he was only a boy.

And had been seriously wounded.

Unable to care for or fend for himself.

In the end, she decided to forego their plan to return to Owari, instead stopping at a nearby inn—when they carried the savaged body of the boy inside, the innkeeper protested,²⁷ but Togame shut him up with money.

She was not the type of person who thought twice²⁸ before exercising her powers.

As they waited for Penguin to recover—the calendar flipped.

From the tenth moon into the eleventh.

“Listen, Togame. I know the doctor said there's no reason to worry about the wounds themselves—but I'm concerned about how slowly he's recovering. He can only speak for a few moments each day—and when he does, he stumbles over his words.”

“He always talks like that,” Togame said, glancing down at Penguin Maniwa as he slept. “Evidently his ninpo is too strong for even him to handle—hence his sickly appearance, and a personality unlikely for a ninja.”

“Pretty thorough.”

“Komori told me.”

Togame sighed and sprang to her feet.

“Come on, we can’t stick around here forever—after what Penguin shared with us today, I think I can connect the dots. I know that this is only a hypothesis, and I can’t deny the possibility that this might be a trap, just like you said—but you and I are out here on a Sword Hunt. If Hohoh Maniwa has Dokuto the Basilisk, one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki, we have no choice but to go and capture it. Way safer bet than getting wrapped up in some complicated dealing.”

“What do we do about the kid?” Shichika stood, following Togame, but pointed back at Penguin. “Are we just gonna leave him here?”

“Dokuto the Basilisk seems to have many characteristics—but apparently the blade itself is laden with venom. Doubtlessly to blame for his most sluggish recovery. Therefore, I see no problem leaving him behind—if he is able to get up, we will be well enough ahead of him that he could never catch us anyway. We’ve heard all we needed to hear. He is no longer our responsibility. Besides,” added Togame, “I doubt the innkeeper would be so heartless as to give a child like him the boot.”

With that, Togame prepared for their departure.

Doffing²⁹ all two dozen layers of brash and brilliant finery, and donning³⁰ two dozen different layers of brash and brilliant finery.

Changing from her loungewear into her travel clothes.

Ever since Shichika’s sister Nanami cropped Togame’s hair short at the shoulders, freshening her look, the time it took for her to change her outfits had reduced considerably. As he helped her change (while doubting somewhat whether changing clothes was really necessary), Shichika continued.

“That’s not what I meant. After all, he is one of those hateful Maniwacs...

Shouldn't I finish him off or something?"

"You mean kill him?"

Though not changing her tone or facial expression, Togame took the opportunity to recast Shichika's chosen euphemism³¹ in direct language.

"Take it easy, Shichika. The Maniwa certainly are hateful—I'm not about to condone their betrayal, but why murder this one for no reason? I'm not so violent as all that."

"Okay...I guess we can leave him."

"Penguin Maniwa may have the most fearsome ninpo out of all the bosses—but given the circumstances, there is no need to kill him off. Why not do them a favor instead, and reap the benefits?³² They may not thank us for our generosity,³³ but we'll make sure they owe us one. They can repay us later, though it might not be until after the Sword Hunt is over. This little ninja is far more useful³⁴ to us alive."

"Useful, huh."

After the Sword Hunt—

This casual remark from Togame snagged Shichika by the heart—and though she may or may not have guessed what Shichika was feeling, she did a hair toss, making that bob look like it had been her style all along.

"Alright, let's head along to Iga," Togame announced. "It's time we paid a visit to New Maniwa—where Hohoh Maniwa headed when he went berserk."³⁵

¹ 流派 RYŪHA sect, school

² あってない ATTE NAI here, but not ³ 単調に 順調に TANCHŌ NI JUNCHŌ
NI simple rhythm steady rhythm ⁴ 矢先 YASAKI turning point (literally,
“arrowhead”) ⁵ 手にかけてようと TE NI KAKYŌ TO try to kill (with own two
hands) ⁶ 手を出さず TE WO DASAZU not reaching out a hand ⁷ 全盛期
ZENSEIKI “full-flourishing era”

⁸ 骨を埋める HONE WO UZUMERU “bury one’s bones” often used to
express dedication ⁹ 生まれつき UMARETSUKI “by dint of/since birth”

¹⁰ 睦月 MUTSUKI first month in the Japanese lunar calendar ¹¹ 色素
SHIKISO “color element”

¹² 依頼 IRAI request (a service) ¹³ 届く TODOKU arrive, reach

¹⁴ 一騎打ち IKKI UCHI duel, vs. a battle between groups ¹⁵ 守護 SHUGO
protect, as a guardian ¹⁶ むろん MURON inarguably

¹⁷ 塗り替え NURIKAE repaint (a map) ¹⁸ 憎き刀 NIKUKI KATANA “hated
sword”

¹⁹ ぐっすり ぐったり GUSSURI GUTTARI onomatopoeia for pleasant sleep vs.
exhaustion ²⁰ 命に別状はない INOCHI NI BETSUJŌ WA NAI no adverse
threat to life ²¹ 半信半疑 HANSHIN HANGI “half believing, half doubting”

²² 嘘臭い USO KUSAI “stinking of lies”

²³ 一説 ISSETSU one theory

²⁴ 致命傷 CHIMEISHŌ mortal injury ²⁵ 直後 CHOKUGO immediately
afterwards ²⁶ 窮地 KYŪCHI “place of suffering”

²⁷ 難色を示した NANSHOKU WO SHIMESHITA “showed troubled colors”

²⁸ ためらいを覚えない TAMERAI WO OBOENAI not experience hesitation

²⁹ 脱いで NUIDE taking off

³⁰ 着る KIRU put on 着物 KIMONO “thing one wears”

³¹ 遠回し TŌMAWASHI roundabout (expression) ³² 恩を売る ON WO URU “peddle favors” an act of kindness performed transactionally ³³ 恩を感じぬ ON WO KANJINU not feel emotionally indebted ³⁴ 利用価値 RIYŌ KACHI “utility value”

³⁵ 乱心 RANSHIN “chaotic heart” lose one’s wits



CHAPTER TWO

DECAPITATION CYCLE



Despite this story being well into its latter stages, the relationships between the characters are more complicated than ever. Let's take a moment to review the folks we've met thus far. Since there probably won't be enough space¹ in Book Twelve, as the last book of the series, to spend a lot of time recapping past events, this will likely be our first and last review of characters.

Luckily, there aren't so many characters to review.

First off.

Our very own Togame the Schemer.

Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu.

She-devil of the bakufu, whose real name and personal history were unknown.

The whitehaired woman always dressed in brash and brilliant finery.

Though the truth²—which, if discovered, would have put her life in danger, was that she was the daughter of Takahito Hida, Kaoyaku of Oshu, and Mastermind of the Rebellion.

In the hopes of taking down the enemy of her father, who lost his life in the Rebellion, she devoted her body and soul to the Owari Bakufu she resented.

Making a name for herself, climbing the ranks.

Her goal was to slip from the inner circle of the bakufu—into its heart.³

The Sword Hunt for the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki was a means to an end.

Unskilled in the martial arts.

Weaker than shoji paper.

She had made it this far, willy-nilly, through her ingenuity and intrigue, relying only on her schemes—and certainly planned to do so in the future.

Though at present, after rounding up the last two swords, Oto the Cured and Seito the Garland, with barely any effort, she was beginning to doubt⁴ the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki—

Next up.

Our own Shichika Yasuri.

Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu.

The Swordless Swordsman—a katana incarnate.

A tall young buck with tousled hair.

Raised on a desert island, he was something of a yokel, but he had been selected⁵ by Togame the Schemer—and partook in the Sword Hunt of his own accord.

In his fifteen fights thus far, he had experienced eleven wins, three defeats, and one draw.

That said, the fight resulting in that final draw was not a proper battle to begin with; and of his three defeats, the first resulted from him underestimating Konayuki Itezora, who was only a young girl, while another resulted from him

getting tangled in the niceties of kendo, so that his only true defeat (or the only defeat that could not be explained away) was in his fight against the genius Nanami Yasuri.

After all, he had obliterated Hakuhei Sabi—

At present, Shichika was the Strongest Swordsman in Japan, a position well beyond reproach.

And crucially, for the developments to follow—Shichika was in fact one of the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki.

Not one of his masterworks, but his magnum opus.

The thousand Mutant Blades, including the Twelve Possessed, being mere prototypes for his final sword.

Shichika Yasuri.

Though strictly speaking, the magnum opus was not just Shichika, but the entire Kyotoryu.

In their pursuit of Seito the Garland, Togame had learned of this from the hermit magus Rinne Higaki, which meant that Shichika heard the story secondhand—though unfortunately, since he lacked her laudable tendency to ponder the significance of life, he didn't really seem to care.

Though needless to say, his status as the magnum opus of Kiki Shikizaki will greatly influence⁶ the shape of the story ahead.

Thirdly.

Princess Negative.

Inspector General of the Yanari Shogunate, Owari Bakufu.

Real name and personal history unknown.

A woman with blond hair and dazzling blue eyes, whose appearance in this closed society was an anomaly.

Another she-devil of the Owari Bakufu.

Sworn enemy of Togame the Schemer.

As chief investigator of the government, she was merely fulfilling her duties by probing⁷ the behavior of Togame the Avenger,⁸ but had their work not pitted them against each other, these two would still have never got along.

Togame had crushed Princess Negative countless times before.

And every time, the Princess had bounced back—more powerful than ever.

Perturbed by her tenacity, Togame made sure to crush Princess Negative once and for all as she worked the plans out for her Sword Hunt—to ensure that this time, Princess Negative would not bounce back—except she did.

Reemerging in the space of half a year.

Once again—more powerful than ever.

The Princess began to offer her two cents on the Schemer's Sword Hunt—betraying that Nanami Yasuri, then owner of Akuto the Eel, had occupied⁹ Seiryoin Gokenji Temple, a holy site for swordsmen. Intimating that Lake Fuyo in Edo was where Kiki Shikizaki had once kept his workshop. Intimating that the hermit who resided at Hyakkeijo in Oshu was in possession of none other than Seito the Garland.

Togame was all the more perturbed by the veracity of this intelligence—but the fact of the matter¹⁰ was simple. As established in the previous installment, Princess Negative was the descendant of the legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki.

Unlike Togame the Schemer, hers was not a personal history which would prove to be a burden once revealed—but all the same, she had shared this information with nobody but her confidant.

At least, for the time being.

Just as Togame the Schemer had her aspirations—Princess Negative had her aspirations.

Though perhaps a bit too...negative to describe as such.

In any event—her personal circumstances afforded her with inside knowledge of the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki. Although at present, it would seem the Princess lacked an understanding of that sword which was a cut above the Twelve Possessed, the magnum opus for which all previous swords were prototypes.

Not even Princess Negative knew everything.

Which is to say, she was unaware of what Shichika Yasuri embodied.

Unaware, as of yet.

Fourthly.

Lieutenant Emonzaemon Soda.

Counselor to the Inspector General of the Yanari Shogunate, Owari Bakufu.

A former ninja, who dressed in a coat and trousers.

The confidant of Princess Negative, discussed above.

As with his liege, his personal history was shrouded in mystery, though he apparently was not concerned with keeping it a secret, for by now Togame the Schemer was in the know—aware that this man was the last descendant of the Aioi Ninja Clan, wiped out by the Maniwa one hundred and seventy years

earlier, after a long struggle.

In addition to Aioi Ninpo, Emonzaemon knew Aioi Kenpo and Aioi Swordsmanship.

He was also a co-owner of Ento the Bead, the last of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

Ento the Bead.

A revolver.¹¹

And an automatic.¹²

Apparently, he shared his ownership with Princess Negative, descendant of Kiki Shikizaki—by whom.

He had been tasked with the assassination of Hohoh Maniwa, effectively the head of the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

With whom it seemed he had some kind of a history, their link yet remaining to be disclosed.

Our fifth character, Hohoh Maniwa, and our sixth character, Penguin Maniwa, are best reviewed together.

Two bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

“Penguin the Breeder,” Penguin Maniwa, of the Maniwa Fish Unit.

“The Divine Phoenix,” Hohoh Maniwa, of the Maniwa Bird Unit.

Penguin Maniwa—had two ninpo moves.

Fate Blaster and Lucky Pucks.

Hohoh Maniwa—at this point had three ninpo moves.

Life Line, Decapitation Cycle, and Infovac.

The Maniwa, that band of expert assassins, originally joined the Sword Hunt as hired hands—called upon by Togame the Schemer to round up one of the swords, a task which they were of a mind to carry through.

But that was easier said than done.

The situation in the village had grown dire—in these times of peace and order, how was a ninja assassin supposed to make a living? But the Maniwa were not so timid as to molder away in obscurity¹³—hence.

The Sword Hunt for the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki was just the sort of fundraiser¹⁴ they needed.

In all likelihood—this could be the last big job entrusted to them by the bakufu.

Except their bucket had a hole in it.¹⁵

Things got off to a good start—they seized Zetto the Leveler from Rairaku Namida of Mino, after which they beat Togame at her own game and stabbed her in the back (despite the Schemer having taken several precautions against being betrayed by the Maniwa)—but things fell apart from there.

“Komori the Hell-Made,” Komori Maniwa, of the Maniwa Beast Unit, fell to Shichika Yasuri.

“Backwards Shirasagi,” Shirasagi Maniwa, of the Bird Unit, fell to Ginkaku Uneri.

“Kuizame the Sand Trap,” Kuizame Maniwa, of the Fish Unit, fell to Meisai Tsuruga.

“Kamakiri the Head Hunter,” Kamakiri Maniwa, of the Bug Unit.

“Flying Butter Chocho,” Chocho Maniwa, of the Bug Unit.

“Mitsubachi the Sharpshooter,” Mitsubachi Maniwa, of the Bug Unit.

All three of whom fell to Nanami Yasuri.

“The Dogged Scourge,” Kyoken Maniwa, of the Beast Unit, fell to Shichika Yasuri.

“The Nosey Otter,” Kauso Maniwa, of the Beast Unit, perished before he had the chance to fight.

“The Immortal Turtle,” Umigame Maniwa, of the Fish Unit, fell to Emonzaemon Soda.

“The Feathered Reel,” Oshidori Maniwa, of the Bird Unit, fell to Emonzaemon Soda as well.

By now.

Of the Twelve Bosses, there were only two.

Such was the current situation of the Maniwa—nay.

The situation of the Maniwa was far worse than even this—one might even say things were as bad as possible.

A story that is about to unfold—but thus, six.

Three camps of two, embroiled in a three-way struggle.¹⁶

The first camp—Togame the Schemer and Shichika Yasuri.

Ten swords to their name.

Zetto the Leveler, Zanto the Razor, Sento the Legion, Hakuto the Whisper, Zokuto the Armor, Soto the Twin, Akuto the Eel, Bito the Sundial, Oto the Cured, Seito the Garland.

Ten swords in total.

The second camp—Princess Negative and Emonzaemon Soda.

Having one sword.

Ento the Bead.

The third camp—Hohoh Maniwa and Pengin Maniwa.

Having one sword.

Dokuto the Basilisk.

Now then, which camp will finally succeed in rounding up all twelve of the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki?

At present, the answer is unknown—but very soon, the answer will be known to all.



Time for a recollection from Pengin Maniwa.

This book is turning out to be a mishmash of recapitulations, reviews of characters, and reminiscences, while the central story makes no progress; but in this reminiscence, some progress will be had.

We return to the month prior.

When Pengin Maniwa and Hohoh Maniwa were walking side by side, heading straight¹⁷ for Hyakkeijo in Oshu—hoping to have a word with Togame the Schemer, who they gathered was at Hyakkeijo in Oshu, attempting to secure Seito the Garland.

In that sense, things were proceeding as planned.

Having been made keenly aware of the strength of Shichika, and of the other owners of the Twelve Possessed, Hohoh Maniwa had visibly taken a step back, fine with attaining the bare minimum—just one of the Twelve Possessed.

They would leave the bulk¹⁸ of the Sword Hunt to the Schemer and the Kyotoryu.

And overtake¹⁹ them afterwards.

That was the plan.

In service of which he had forged an alliance with the Schemer and sacrificed a comrade.

Proceeding as planned—indeed.

At that point, Togame had gathered nine of the Twelve Possessed, and Hohoh Maniwa was carrying Dokuto the Basilisk on his person—making it perhaps as good a time as any to attempt to turn the tide.

Pengin thought it would be best to overtake the Schemer after she had captured one or perhaps even two more swords, bringing her count to ten or eleven—and wondered, too, whether they might wait for her to come to them, rather than go to her, but Hohoh seemed to believe that doing so would make them miss their opportunity.

Which was probably correct.

His belief was not the problem.

Remember, all of those belonging to the Maniwa Ninja Clan, including Pengin, were in some way or another broken souls, poorly suited to the task of crafting strategies—or even executing them. In fact, the plan crafted by Hohoh had been

temporarily snafued²⁰ by one of the Twelve Bosses, “The Dogged Scourge” Kyoken Maniwa. It fell to Hohoh Maniwa, effectively the head of the entire ninja clan and the sole boss endowed with some degree of sociability,²¹ to mobilize the other ninjas around a counterstrategy.

Which is why—Penguin had no right to talk back.

If Hohoh thought they should take action now, he must be right—although in retrospect, Hohoh was perhaps already too late.

“Discontinued.”

Then.

After crossing over from Dewa into Mutsu, they were nearly at their destination—when Penguin and Hohoh saw a figure blocking the road before them.

A man dressed in a coat and trousers, wearing a pair of swords.

A mask covering his face—on which were scrawled the words “NON-NINJA.”

“I knew that if I waited here you would turn up—Hohoh Maniwa...and Penguin Maniwa? Ah yes...since it would be insufferable if you asked me question after question, I’ll introduce myself before you have the chance—I am Lieutenant Emonzaemon Soda, and I am here to kill you both.”

“Yee...”

Penguin heard himself shriek.

This was not their first encounter with this man—in the ninth moon²² in Izu, when Hohoh Maniwa, Penguin Maniwa, and Oshidori Maniwa were gathered around Dokuto the Basilisk, their recent find, determining a course of action, out of nowhere—this bemasked gentleman appeared beside them.

On that occasion, Oshidori staved him off.

Using her body as a shield—to protect Hohoh and Penguin and Dokuto the Basilisk.

The efficacy of which was now in question.

The only certainty was that Oshidori had yet to rendezvous with them—

“Wondering about Oshidori Maniwa? I killed her.”

Reading into the look on Penguin’s face, which was rather juvenile for a ninja, the bemasked gentleman—Emonzaemon Soda doubled down.

On account of his mask, Penguin was unable to read his expression in return.

He could not possibly.

“I mentioned this to Oshidori—so I may as well tell you. I killed Umigame too.”

Penguin was speechless, but Hohoh remained unfazed, taking a step forward so as to protect Penguin.

“Ah,” he said. “Umigame, huh.”

“I’m sure you weren’t expecting him to be alive—get the picture, Hohoh Maniwa? Of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa, you two are the only ones left.”

“We get the picture, no thanks to you. You think this news is gonna scare us off? Don’t make me laugh,”²³ said Hohoh. “A ninja lives to die.”

“You never change,” said Emonzaemon. “You haven’t changed a bit, Hohoh.”

This comment was disturbing.

Indeed.

He made it sound like he and Hohoh were old acquaintances—although.

Having suspected this, Penguin had brought it up with Hohoh just the other day—but his answer was not that they were “old acquaintances.”

There was a man he used to know.

But there was no way this was him—

“Well,” said Hohoh. “What took you so long to come after me? I’ve been ready, you know. Don’t think you’ve caught me by surprise by ambushing me on the highway.”

“I’m a busy man—with lots to do. Assassinating you is but a minor errand. Let’s get this over with. I’m eager to get back on track.”²⁴

“Back on track, huh? You and me both...hold on, though, I can’t let what you said slip by. About how I never change? That makes it sound—like you’ve known who I am for ages.”

“Spare me, Hohoh—there’s no way that you’re serious. Surely you figured things out last time—when we ran into one another in Izu. Why else would you have run away?”

“Run away? No chance I’m letting that slip,” Hohoh said. “But more than anything, I can’t let you get away with this ludicrous name, Emonzaemon Soda—if you really are the person I think you are, why not sing it loud for all to hear? What’s stopping you from standing tall and announcing who you are?”

“Sorry, Hohoh, but that’s my real name now,” replied Emonzaemon Soda. “You and I are different. Can’t you see?”

“—You certainly have changed. Hey, get back there,” Hohoh warned Penguin, without turning around. “This open country is no place to try and use your ninpo, not the Fate Blaster and definitely not the Lucky Pucks.”

“O-Okay—”

Pengin nodded and scooted away from Hohoh.

“B-Be careful, Hohoh. If he really did k-kill Umigame and Oshidori—this man is really powerful.”

“I know,” acknowledged Hohoh. *“You’re saying that he’s basically as powerful as me—”*

“Incorrigible,” said Emonzaemon, reaching for the swords slung from his hip. “I cannot suppress my laughter, Hohoh Maniwa—you sound like some kind of a comedian. You and I, equally powerful? *Thanks for stating the obvious—*”

As Emonzaemon spoke—Pengin was certain he would pull out his swords. He guessed that this bemasked gentleman must favor the dual wield—though while Emonzaemon indeed pulled at his swords, he pulled them off entirely, scabbard and all.

Whereupon he tossed both weapons haphazardly aside.

“My Aioi Swordplay failed against both Umigame Maniwa and Oshidori Maniwa—I hope you don’t mind if we skip ahead. Besides, I’m not really a swordsman—there’s no rule saying that I need to use a sword.”

“Fair enough.”

But then.

Hohoh did the same—pulling his sword from his waist, scabbard and all.

His sword, of course, being Dokuto the Basilisk.

One of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

“Hold onto that,” Hohoh instructed Pengin.

A fight where both opponents tossed aside their swords.

At least, that's what appeared to be transpiring.

"No weapons. Ain't that right—what was it, Emonzaemon?"

"Emonzaemon. So it is,"²⁵ affirmed Emonzaemon.

"A fight relying solely on our physical and mental caliber," Hohoh said. "Works for me."

"Great," nodded the lieutenant.

And right before he finished nodding—Hohoh made the first move.

Deploying²⁶ the cache of shuriken he had been hiding in his palm, right before Emonzaemon could act.

But Emonzaemon was no slouch.

Though acting a moment behind, he answered with shuriken of his own—unlike those deployed by Hohoh, his were long like darts, essentially kunai, which made them all the faster—so that in the end.

The shuriken each ninja threw collided in midair between them, spraying off in random directions.

They had agreed to battle without weapons, only to throw shuriken, but neither of them protested. The fight continued—and why not?

Both were ninjas.

The fact that one of them was actively a ninja and the other a former ninja notwithstanding—dirty deeds were how they made a living.

However, Pengin Maniwa had no way of knowing that Emonzaemon was a former ninja as he watched them from the sidelines—as one of the youngest

ninja in the village, in fact just a kid, there was no chance that he knew about the Aioi Ninja Clan, who had been wiped out one hundred and seventy years earlier.

No chance he knew—and yet.

From the way Emonzaemon threw those shuriken, he intuited that the non-ninja had some kind of a background²⁷ in the ninja arts.

—That being said.

If they got closer, Hohoh would be sure to win.

Of that much Penguin was certain.

Up close and personal—Decapitation Cycle was guaranteed to reign supreme. Emonzaemon Soda may have taken care of Umigame Maniwa and Oshidori Maniwa—but up against that move, the game was over.

Which is why—Penguin was confident that Hohoh would be victorious.

Confident—and yet he was unable to shake this feeling of unease. Or, even if he shook it off, it bubbled back—again and again and again.

Unease.

A nasty feeling.

This went beyond Penguin being easily worked up.

In actuality—when these overtures²⁸ were over, and Hohoh Maniwa and Emonzaemon Soda entered into the very sort of close-range combat Penguin had envisioned—the fight seemed like it could carry on indefinitely.

Neither one could make a hit.

Nor stand still for a second.

No clincher came from either side.

Not that they could neglect defense.

Pengin watched them from the sidelines, as they wore each other down.²⁹

Exhausting each other—in a battle of attrition.

They may have been unarmed, but from the look on Hohoh's face, this was anything but easy—while it was impossible for them to read the face of Emonzaemon.

—But why?

Clutching Dokuto the Basilisk to his breast, Pengin felt perplexed.

—Why isn't Hohoh using the Decapitation Cycle?

From that distance—Emonzaemon was well within the range of his Ninpo Decapitation Cycle—

So why not use it?

"H-Hohoh!" Pengin exclaimed. "D-Decapitation Cycle! Use the Decapitation Cycle!"

"Ah, yes."

This affirmation came not from Hohoh, but from Emonzaemon.

"So, Hohoh, that's what you've named *that move*—the Decapitation Cycle?"

"..."

Hohoh declined to respond.

He could not rest from his attacks—or his defenses.

Same goes for Emonzaemon, who while keeping up his side of the fight,

turned breezily to Penguin and continued, “Listen, Penguin—this Decapitation Cycle you mentioned. In the Aioi tradition, we called that ninpo Gored Alive—”

“G-Gored alive?”³⁰

“And now, as part of my non-ninpo, I call it—Endlessly Unsparing.”

“Gah!”

Penguin was no dimwit³¹ youngster. He may have had weak nerves, but his mind outstripped any of the adults.³²

Now—he had heard enough.

Everything was clear.

“It’s funny, Hohoh,” said Emonzaemon. “You’re a fine ninja—so fine that even as the other bosses die away,³³ the Maniwa remains formidable, as long as you’re around. But make no mistake—I cannot lose against you.”





“ ... ”

“Because you are me.”

Life Line.

Alongside the Decapitation Cycle, this ninja move could well be called synonymous with Hohoh Maniwa. Using this ninjutsu, he could take on the moves of others—by slicing off their body parts and grafting them onto his body.

To wit, the left arm he was using had previously been the left arm of Kawauso Maniwa, another of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa, enabling Hohoh to employ Kawauso’s Infovac, a move similar to psychometry.

If the Decapitation Cycle was originally the move of Emonzaemon Soda—and the same move as “Gored Alive” and “Endlessly Unsparing”—then no wonder Hohoh was unable to deploy it.

For knowing an advanced move inheres a comprehension of its shortcomings. Indeed.

This is why Hohoh had said there was no way this man was him when Penguin asked if he and Emonzaemon were acquaintances—the Life Line necessitates that you kill off your opponent, as a preliminary condition!

...

But in that case, how was it possible that Emonzaemon Soda was here now, and alive?

“I died once,” declared Emonzaemon, as if answering this question. “Matters of the flesh aside, you killed my spirit. But I was rescued by my liege, who negated this death on my behalf—which is why I will devote my soul entire³⁴ to the execution of whatever order I receive from her.”

“Negated? I suppose that means your liege—is the Princess?”

“Took you long enough.”

“Hah.”

Though hearing Emonzaemon out—or rather, letting his words in one ear and out the other, Hohoh Maniwa showed absolutely no signs of agitation.

Or bravado.³⁵

An acquaintance whom he had taken for dead—whom he had thought he killed by his own hand, had materialized before his very eyes, but Hohoh seemed rather unimpressed.

“Sure, Emonzaemon, but this door swings both ways—if you are me, then I am you. Which means that if we keep this up, I may not win, but I won’t be losing to you either.”

“Perhaps,” said Emonzaemon.

Speaking—as the two of them fought on.

It would seem they had both exhausted their supply of shuriken and other secret weapons, so that the fight between Hohoh Maniwa and Emonzaemon Soda became a matter of hand-to-hand combat.

Close range—and a close contest.

From a certain angle, it almost looked as if the two of them were carrying out a choreographed performance. Such was the precision of their movements—evenly matched to boot.

Achieving a graceful equilibrium that seemed to shun any outside assistance.

If Penguin were, in fact, to leap into the fray, they should be able to tip the balance against Emonzaemon, since there were two of them and one of

him—Penguin realized this (albeit after the fact) but was unable to act on it (having realized after the fact).

Had he leapt into the fray and messed things up, however, he could have tipped the scales unfavorably for him and Hohoh.

Such was the balance of their equilibrium.

Hence, no clincher came from either side.

—He's basically as powerful as me.

Penguin was reminded of these words from Hohoh.

This fight was serious as they come, but to Penguin it appeared they were exchanging only token blows³⁶ because their lives hung in the balance.

—Which is why.

Which is why Penguin believed that the longer things were drawn out—the greater Hohoh's chance of being defeated. This went beyond Penguin being innately pessimistic; it was a fundamental truth.

Consider Nanami Yasuri.

The move, if you could even call it that, called Watch and Learn, which was her genius manifest, had something in common with the Life Line—as Hohoh had admitted once himself.

But with a crucial difference.

She needed not kill her adversary or graft on one of their body parts. She simply watched. Watch a move once, and she would learn the ins and outs; watch twice and she would make the move her own. This was what made the Watch and Learn so terrifying—Nanami could come away wielding a move so masterfully that she surpassed the person she had learned it from.

She was a genius.

While Hohoh Maniwa may have been a fine ninja, he was unfortunately not a genius.

Since he had yet to grow accustomed to the arm of Kawauso, or for that matter his ninpo, which still felt somewhat foreign, Hohoh could not yet claim a mastery of the Infovac.

Though it was unclear when—Hohoh Maniwa must have stolen the Decapitation Cycle from Emonzaemon Soda quite some time ago.

By now he must have developed some degree of mastery.

And yet—it was doubtful that his mastery surpassed that of its original practitioner, Emonzaemon Soda.

Of course, by now Hohoh Maniwa had used his Life Line to acquire not only the Decapitation Cycle and the Infovac—there was no counting all the moves his body housed.

Surely there were plenty of moves that Penguin did not know about.

And yet—Hohoh seemed to lack any opportunity to use them.

Emonzaemon would not give him the chance.

It would seem he understood not just the Decapitation Cycle—but had a seasoned understanding of exactly how to fend off “The Divine Phoenix,” Hohoh Maniwa.

Emonzaemon fought less like someone who had prepared the right strategy, than like someone who had known it all along.

The bond of old acquaintances.

The bond of stolen ninpo.

The bond of a killer and the killed.

Which is why—though it may look as if they had achieved an equilibrium, there was no way they could keep this up forever. Because Hohoh was fighting someone he assumed to have been dead for ages, while Emonzaemon was not.

Surely Hohoh had been wondering about this since their encounter at Izu—but he must not have been certain.

He could not possibly have understood all that had happened.

In the meantime—Emonzaemon had understood it all along, with obdurate³⁷ endurance!³⁸

He understood both past and present!

“H-Hohoh! Hohoh—use this!”

In that instant.

Pengin Maniwa—made a mistake of judgment.

Considering the circumstances, it was the worst mistake imaginable.

Of course, when Pengin made this mistake, he had no idea his judgment was mistaken—in fact, he thought this was the only way to break the equilibrium at play between Hohoh and Emonzaemon.

And so.

Pengin—flung Dokuto the Basilisk, sheath and all, which Hohoh had instructed him to hold, sending it spinning toward his back.

One of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

Venom stronger than any other—despotically toxic.

While spinning through the air, the sword slipped from its sheath. The

scabbard fell by the wayside—but the katana flew straight ahead.

There was something meaningful about its rectilinearity—as it flew in a straight line toward Hohoh.

A sword does not choose who to kill.

But a sword will choose its owner.

Exactly as the saying goes—as if choosing its owner, it flew toward Hohoh.

What follows is what Penguin thought would happen.

A juvenile way of seeing things.

The Mutant Blades of legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki—which influenced the power balance of the Age of Warring States so immensely that the number of swords owned by a state was a direct indication of its power.

Among which were the masterworks, boasting a level of perfection far above the rest.

And among these was Dokuto the Basilisk, whose venom was the strongest of them all.

If he used *this*—Penguin believed that Hohoh could break through the symmetry that had been formed, at least as far as he could see, between him and Emonzaemon.

If Hohoh Maniwa used Dokuto the Basilisk.

Then surely, he could topple Emonzaemon—or so Penguin thought.

The thought itself was worthy of consideration.

But acting on it was an error.

To say the least—a strategist like Togame the Schemer or a tactician like

Princess Negative, even on the worst of days, would never think of opting for such a move.

Hohoh had strictly forbidden the unsheathing of the Basilisk. As a result, when Penguin threw the sword and saw it slip free from its scabbard, he laid eyes on its blade for the first time.

The katana—was pitch black.

Dokuto the Basilisk—a black blade with an obsidian sheen.³⁹

Blacker than night, it had a sinister air.

Just shy of five feet long.

Lacking a handguard, the sword had a pronounced curve.

“Uh!”

For his part, Hohoh Maniwa might have realized Penguin’s mistake already.

But given that an unsheathed katana was flying at him from behind—even a ninja of his caliber had no choice but to catch it.

Especially in the throes of his fight against Emonzaemon.

He could not jump away.

Or rather, even if he jumped away, he would not get away with it—for jumping away was tantamount to handing Dokuto the Basilisk to Emonzaemon, left standing in his place.

Which is why.

Hohoh Maniwa reached out his left hand—and without turning around, seized the grip of Dokuto the Basilisk as if his life depended on it.⁴⁰



What happened next was all too simple.

So simple, and yet so painful for Penguin Maniwa to recall.

Point being, when Hohoh Maniwa caught Dokuto the Basilisk.

He cut down Emonzaemon Soda.

And backhanding it,⁴¹ cut down Penguin Maniwa.

Carrying the bare blade, paying no mind to the scabbard flung down by the wayside—he turned about and left that place behind.

Hence how Hohoh Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa, went berserk.

¹ 紙幅 SHIFUKU “paper width”

² 実体 JITTAI “real body” actual identity ³ 中枢 中心 CHŪSŪ CHŪSHIN center core ⁴ 不信感 FUSHINKAN sense of distrust ⁵ 抜擢 BATTEKI hand-picked, for a promotion vs. 刀は持ち主を選ぶ KATANA WA MOCHINUSHI WO ERABU “a sword chooses its owner”

⁶ 左右する SAYŪ SURU “(nudge) left and right”

⁷ 目を光らす ME WO HIKARASU “shine one’s eyes”

⁸ 復讐者 FUKUSHŪSHA one who seeks revenge ⁹ 占拠 SENKYO take over

(a castle, city, etc.) ¹⁰ 種を明かしてしまえば TANE WO AKASHITE SHIMAEBA
once the (magic trick's) working is revealed ¹¹ 回転式連発拳銃
KAITENSHIKI RENPATSU KENJŪ “revolving-type rapid-fire handgun”

¹² 自動式連発拳銃 JIDŌSHIKI RENPATSU KENJŪ “automatic-type rapid-
fire handgun”

¹³ 黙って朽ち果てていく DAMATTE KUCHIHATETE IKU “rot away in silence”

¹⁴ 資金繰り SHIKIN GURI “spinning finances”

¹⁵ 泥船 DOROBUNE boat made from mud (which dissolves once in the
water) ¹⁶ 巴戦 TOMOE SEN “swirling battle”

¹⁷ 一路 ICHIRO “one road” (i.e. no shortcuts or diversions) ¹⁸ 大半
TAIHAN “big half”

¹⁹ 引っ繰り返す HIKKURI KAESU flip over (in a come-from-behind victory)
²⁰ 台無しに DAINASHI NI deprived of a (Buddhist statue's) base ²¹ 社会性
SHAKAISEI social nature, *i.e.* people skills ²² 長月 NAGATSUKI “long moon”
ninth month of the Japanese lunar calendar ²³ 片腹痛い KATAHARA ITAI
“my belly hurts on one side” *i.e.* from laughing ²⁴ 本題に戻りたい HONDAI
NI MODORITAI wish to return to the main topic (or issue) ²⁵ そうだ SŌDA
“indeed” homophonous with 左右田 SŌDA, last name of the lieutenant ²⁶
投擲 TŌTEKI hurl (e.g. a grenade) ²⁷ 出自 SHUTSUJI “where one emerges”
origins ²⁸ 序盤戦 JOBAN SEN opening stages of a battle ²⁹ 削り合い KEZURI
AI mutual abrasion ³⁰ 生殺し NAMAGOROSHI nearly killing, but not quite
(sadistically) ³¹ 察しの悪い SASSHI NO WARUI bad at perceiving ³² 大人顔
負け OTONA KAO MAKE “(even) adults lose just at the sight of his face”

³³ 目減り MEBERI decrease (in number or value) ³⁴ 全霊 ZENREI “total spirit”

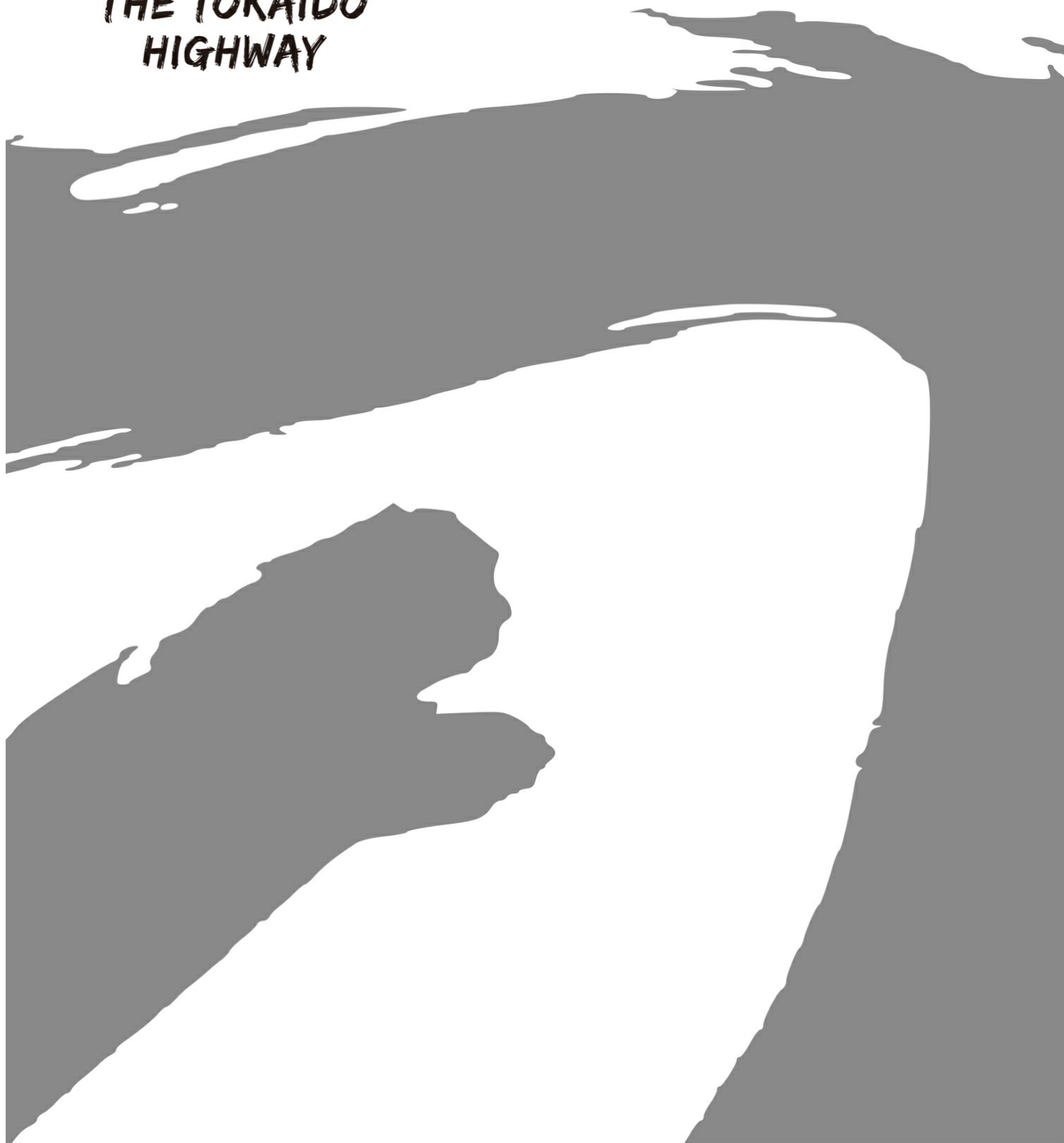
³⁵ 虚勢 KYOSEI “false valiance” vs. 虚刀流 KYOTORYŪ

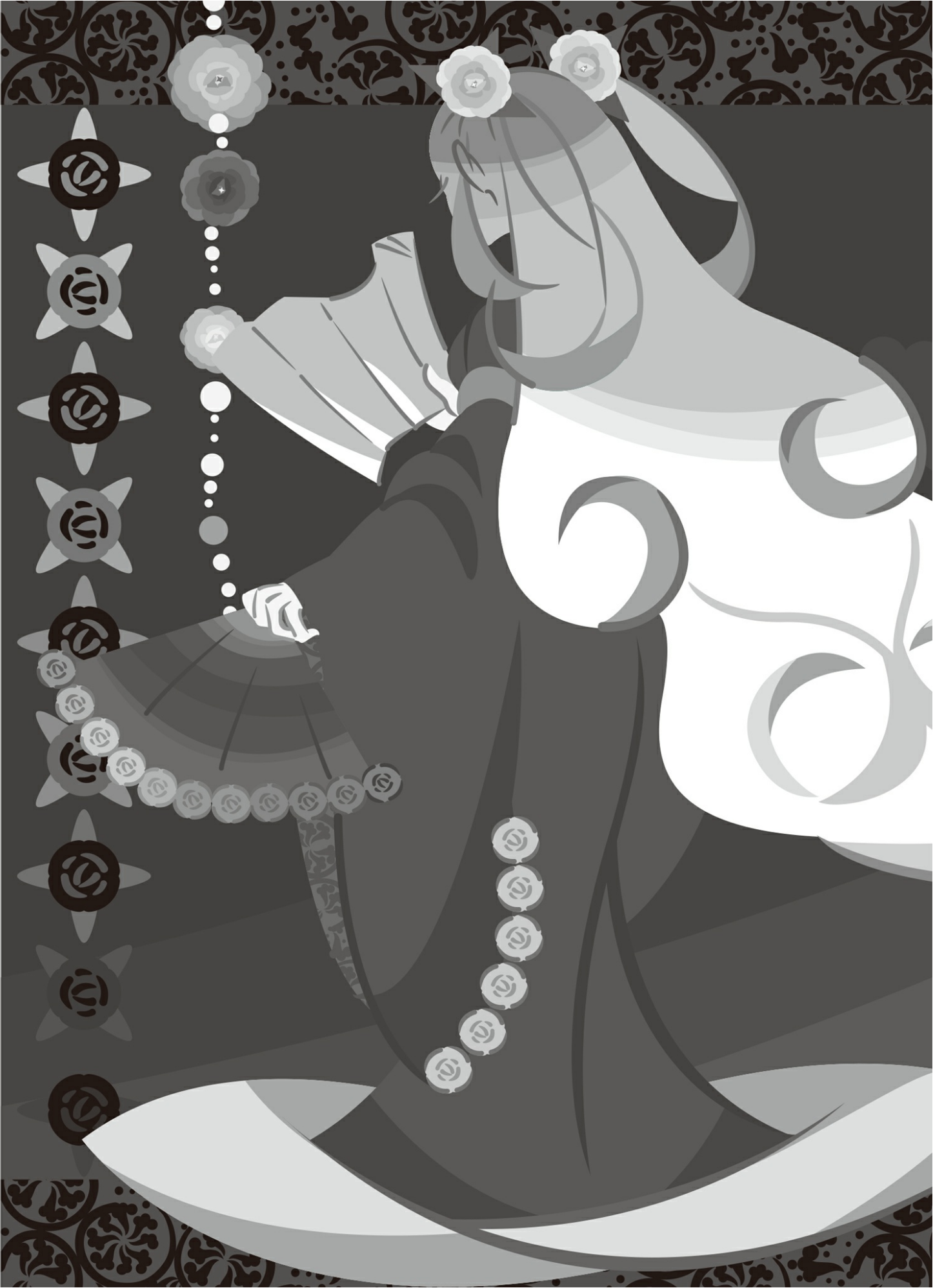
³⁶ 牽制ばかり KENSEI BAKARI all feints ³⁷ 絶えることなく TAERU KOTO NAKU ceaselessly ³⁸ 耐え忍びながら TAESHINOBI NAGARA continuing to withstand pun on 忍び SHINOBI ninja ³⁹ 黒光り KUROBIKARI “black shine”

⁴⁰ がっしりと GASSHIRI TO onomatopoeia for holding something tight ⁴¹ 返す刀で KAESU KATANA DE “with turned sword” striking on a new side in quick succession

CHAPTER THREE

THE TOKAIDO HIGHWAY









In the home of the Yanari Shogunate—in Owari Town.

At Mansion Negative—abode of the Inspector General of the Yanari Shogunate—within one room of which.

Princess Negative, as usual, stood alone.

Not lighting any lamps—nor sitting down.

Metal fan in hand.

Standing.

“...”

But things were not as usual.

There was something different about the tableau.

In the hand not holding her metal fan, the woman with blond hair and dazzling blue eyes held a one-page letter.

Sent by her confidant—Emonzaemon Soda, from the field.

Freshly delivered—a report.

And what did this report have to say?

“Togame the Schemer...”

Princess Negative muttered to herself with a melancholic air—and in a languid

tone.

“Oh, Togame—how I sincerely loathe you. I despise you from the bottom of my heart. Here I am, so confident in how I feel, that I would crush you even if you were a nobody, even if you were not plotting anything at all—I thought that we were enemies, and in a way that goes beyond my function as Inspector General. I thought we had something, a bizarre kind of bond, something that would last—this is the last straw.”

She crumpled up the letter in her hand.

As if that piece of paper were the most repulsive thing imaginable.

Crumpling the paper—as if rejecting its existence.

“I never wanted things to end this way,” she said. “It’s such a shame—Schemer. Your carelessness revolts me to no end...hmph.”

Princess Negative tossed the letter, which had been crumpled in a messy ball, into the corner of the room—and set her gaze beyond the chamber.

“At this point, I hope you’ll at least carry out your final duty—where was it, Iga? Maniwa Village? You must be nearly there. By now I bet you’re on the Tokaido Highway.¹ I hope you’re ready for a challenge. I can’t claim to understand the extent of the Kyotoryu, but *my ancestor* is as tough as they come, I tell you what. I mean, he had abilities that never made it down to me. At the very least,” said Princess Negative, “I hope you sign off with a flourish.”

After leaving Dewa, Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, and Togame the Schemer headed straight for Iga. Shichika suggested that they stop by Owari along the way, but Togame had evidently planned their route in such a manner that it was not possible.

“If we stop in Owari, I am professionally obligated to pay a visit to the castle—and meet with Princess Negative to boot. Costing us a day or two, which right now is more than we can spare. Besides, visiting the castle is all about fanning egos. What could be more boring than extending pleasantries with the high and mighty?”

If they had time and energy to waste on that sort of thing, Togame reasoned that they may as well spend it on their journey, to get themselves to Iga even one day faster.

“Hey, Togame.”

They had traversed more than half of the Tokaido Highway on foot, putting them well past Owari—when Shichika brought it up.

“Crazy, right...like it was right under our noses this whole time.² We got this far with no idea where to find New Maniwa, and it’s in Iga, of all places.”

Iga, of course, being home to the headquarters of the Onmitsu, the group of ninjas in the service of the bakufu.

Shichika had learned this earlier in the Sword Hunt. If the bakufu had failed to realize the New Maniwa had chosen Iga as the site of their new settlement, they had made quite the oversight.

“After the New Maniwa went rogue, the Onmitsu lost a considerable degree of clout within the bakufu—this must have been their way of using that against

them. If word got out, the Onmitsu are liable to fall even further toward the ground. Or may even go underground, at this rate.”

“What? Is that why we’re not stopping at Owari? So you don’t have to tell them?”

“Don’t be silly. Why on earth would I feel obligated to cover for the Onmitsu? I merely felt that a report like that would serve us little, given the task at hand. Last thing we need is the Onmitsu catching wind and making a big stink.”

“Iga, huh... We’ve been all kinds of places on this Sword Hunt, but oddly enough I think this is our first time in Kansai.³ Strange how things worked out... but I guess we stayed in Kyoto for a little while at the start of it?”

“Let’s see.”

Prompted by Shichika, Togame counted on her fingers.

“We started off on your home turf on Haphazard Island...then Inaba, Izumo, Ganryu Island, Satsuma, Ezo, Tosa, Dewa, Mutsu...right? And now Iga. If you factor in the stops we made along the way, we’ve made a loop around Japan. Though I suppose we’ve skirted the Hokuriku area.”⁴

“Yeah.”

“When the Sword Hunt is over,” Togame said, “it might be fun to take a little trip there, just the two of us.”

“Huh?”

“Then I can produce a map of the whole country and sell copies. You know how I’m real good at drawing maps? There’s plenty of charts out there with suspect proportions, but come to think of it no one has made a definitive⁵ map of Japan since this country was founded—I’ll make a killing.”

“Uh, um.”

Shichika was distraught.

As far as he could recall anyway, this was the first time that Togame had mentioned what they would do after the Sword Hunt was over—at least in terms of concrete plans.

Up until now, she had diligently avoided any such discussion.

When Shichika had brought it up, she had responded in the vaguest terms.

And yet.

“So Hohoh Maniwa has gone berserk,” Togame changed the subject before Shichika could sort himself out. “Hard to say if this is good news or bad news. What do you think?”

“Yeah, uh, not too sure.”

Knowing there was no going back when talking with Togame, he went ahead and answered her question.

“I gotta admit, I’m lost about this whole berserk thing. What would make Hohoh Maniwa behave like that?”

“Confused? And yet you nodded sagely⁶ the whole time Penguin spoke... What am I going to do with you?” Togame sighed dramatically. “Clearly, he has been poisoned by the venom of his Shikizaki blade.”

“The venom—of his Shikizaki blade?”

The turn of phrase sounded almost nostalgic to Shichika.

“I suppose for quite some time,” Togame said, “our rivals have shown no signs of being stricken with the venom of the Shikizaki blades—especially with Rinne Higaki and Seito the Garland, and with Zanki Kiguchi and Oto the Cured,

but also with Nanami Yasuri and Akuto the Eel. Her genius gobbled the venom up. And don't forget Konayuki Itezora, who only had Soto the Twin for a short while. Which means the last time we were up against someone noticeably affected by the venom was way back with Kanara Azeкура."

"Wow...and Azeкура was a pirate, not a swordsman."

Aside from Zanki Kiguchi and Oto the Cured, the last time Shichika had fought an owner of a Shikizaki blade who was actually a swordsman was on Ganryu Island, versus Hakuhei Sabi.

Dokuto the Basilisk.

Venom stronger than any of the Twelve Possessed—

"Now that you mention it, though," inquired Shichika, "Hohoh Maniwa isn't a swordsman either, right? No matter how strong the venom of this sword is, could it really be so crazy that it poisoned him the second that he grabbed it?"

"Hohoh Maniwa is not a swordsman, I'll give you that."

Togame raised her left arm, as if showing it to Shichika.

"But his left arm being what it is—"

"Left arm?"

Of course—Hohoh's left arm had originally belonged to Kawauso Maniwa.

Pengin Maniwa had mentioned this.

The Life Line—

When they first encountered Hohoh Maniwa in Satsuma, he had cut off his own arm, in negotiating his alliance with Togame the Schemer. The next month, when they crossed paths with him again atop Mt. Odori in Ezo, Hohoh Maniwa had a left arm alright, when he should have been without.

This had to do with the Life Line.

The left arm he had seemingly grown back must have been from one of the dead pirates found in Satsuma—but at present, his left arm used to belong to Kauso Maniwa.

According to Penguin Maniwa.

The logic was already too convoluted for Shichika's brain to process, but if he took some time, perhaps he could wrap his head around it.

But what exactly was she getting at?

"Stay with me, Shichika..."

This time, Togame sighed for real.

"We learned about the Infovac when we met Kauso Maniwa in Ezo. It allows access, upon contact, to the memory of inanimate objects—in a word, psychometry. And now—Hohoh is able to use this very ninpo. By grafting the left arm of Kauso onto his body, Hohoh can run the Infovac—which is how the Maniwa discovered Dokuto the Basilisk."

"Makes sense."

"And with that left arm, Hohoh Maniwa was unfortunate enough to make contact with Dokuto the Basilisk. Sending the venom coursing through his veins."

"Whoa—"

From the sound of it, the Life Line and the Infovac had backfired.

The venom of the blade coursed through his veins.

From the tip of his toes to the top of his head.

Hohoh went berserk—turning his sword against both friend and foe and heading for Iga.

“Wow. When you put it that way, that ninpo sure does have its pros and cons.⁷ On the one hand, you get to have this ridiculous ability to take on any challenge imaginable, but that doesn’t mean that you don’t have to pay a price.”

“That isn’t exclusive to his ninpo. Your sister’s Watch and Learn has its fair share of commonalities with the Life Line.”

“Sure it does... Well, I guess this means that Dokuto the Basilisk actually does have as much venom as he said it does.”

“We’ll have a hard enough time capturing that sword from Hohoh, now that he’s gone berserk, but we’ll have to take extra precautions not to touch it. At least we already have the scabbard—”

Hohoh Maniwa had run off with the unsheathed sword. Meaning, the scabbard had been left flung by the wayside. Currently it was stuffed into the luggage Shichika was shouldering.

“—Since neither of us can use the Infovac, I doubt that bumping into it would do us any harm, but just in case.”

“Oh.”

Shichika remembered something.

Their practical discussion of capturing the sword—that is, wresting it from the berserk Hohoh Maniwa, jogged his memory.

“After everything that Penguin told us, we still don’t know a thing about this other ninpo Hohoh Maniwa can do—the Decapitation Cycle.”

“Fool,” Togame brushed this off unceremoniously. “Why would he tell us such a thing? That boy may not look like much, but he’s one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa—any ninpo employed by the leader⁸ of his organization is top-secret information.”

“Suppose so.”

“Although we are not without some intelligence—specifically, we know that the Decapitation Cycle is the same move as Endlessly Unsparing, one of the non-ninpo practiced by Emonzaemon. Very, very interesting.”

“Wow.”

Endlessly Unsparing.

The non-ninpo formerly known as Gored Alive.

“So it started off as Aioi Ninpo, huh? I mean, we still don’t have a clue what it involves though, right?”

“That is correct. And as a former ninja, Emonzaemon would never offer up those details—hey, about Emonzaemon...”

Emonzaemon—cut down by Hohoh Maniwa.

And yet, his body was not laying in the road.

Which means—though Hohoh Maniwa cut him down, he had survived and escaped.

What a performance, thought Shichika, genuinely impressed.

If he was able to get up, his injuries must have been far less serious than Penguin’s.

“You think—he went back to Owari?”

“Perhaps—I suppose this means that Princess Negative’s directive to assassinate Hohoh Maniwa went awry? Although, I guess the Princess ordered Emonzaemon to assassinate Hohoh after those two guys picked up Dokuto the Basilisk—”

“Hey, Togame.”

Shichika had a question.

“There’s something I can’t understand.”

“If there’s something you do actually understand, perhaps you should start there. Though I suppose you should get credit for speaking up when something falls outside your understanding. Well, what is it? Tell me what you’ve failed to understand.”

“In Hohoh Maniwa’s ninpo, he kills his enemy, cuts off part of their body, and grafts it onto his, allowing him to use their skills. Right? That’s what he did with Kawauso Maniwa—but what about Emonzaemon? At first glance, he isn’t missing any body parts. He obviously isn’t dead, and his arms and legs and body⁹ are all fine. He’s in perfect shape.”¹⁰

“Well, the fact that Emonzaemon is alive means that we’re wrong about the necessary conditions. The Life Line requires Hohoh to kill his enemy—*or so it seems*, but evidently there are cases where it can be performed without a kill.”

“Whoa.”

“Death of the spirit would suffice—perhaps that’s how it happened. Too late for us to hope to understand, but that would certainly explain things.”

“Gotcha. But...”

“But?”

“Yeah, but...if Emonzaemon’s arms and legs and body are all fine, meaning he’s able-bodied—how did Hohoh Maniwa steal the Decapitation Cycle, or whatever it was called when it was Emonzaemon’s move?”

“Because he’s not in perfect shape,” Togame said, pointing at her own face. “If Emonzaemon Soda has a reason for wearing a mask, and why he never takes it off—that alone gives you an answer to your question.”

“...”

For a moment, Shichika was in the dark—but in the next moment, he saw the light.

“You mean...he peeled his face off?”

“And pasted that face onto his own,” the Schemer said, gulping down¹¹ her emotions.

Togame the Schemer had witnessed a great many brutalities in her day—but this particular fact was so horrific she could not bring herself to say a word more than she did.

“I can understand why he would wanna switch arms...but switching faces is too much. All for the Decapitation Cycle? Is that how bad he wanted to learn this move?”

“No—from what I gather, learning the move was something of a bonus,¹² in that case.”

“Bonus?”

“Though I cannot say for sure when Hohoh Maniwa usurped the face of Emonzaemon Soda—I doubt it happened recently.”

“Hmm.”

Surely this had been before Emonzaemon was scooped up by Princess Negative—in which case, if what Togame said was true, it could not possibly have happened recently.

That being said, apparently not even Togame had a clear idea of how long Emonzaemon had been the confidant of Princess Negative.

One day, out of nowhere, Emonzaemon and the Princess were inseparable.

“By my estimation, this happened before Hohoh Maniwa was chosen to become one of the Twelve Bosses.”

“Why is that?”

“What Hohoh Maniwa wanted—was not the Aioi Ninpo known as Gored Alive or the Non-Ninpo Endlessly Unsparing. I daresay what he wanted was Emonzaemon’s personality.”

“P-Personality?”

“One of the main reasons why Hohoh Maniwa is effectively the leader of the entire ninja clan is his sociability—he said so himself, did he not?”

For the most part, the ninja belonging to the Maniwa Ninja Clan had some kind of a personality defect—to put it bluntly, they were broken.

A fact of which Shichika was uncomfortably aware.

Komori Maniwa. Kuizame Maniwa. Kyoken Maniwa.

He wasn’t sure about Kawauso or Penguin—but those three were so morally corrupt that in a certain sense, they were far worse than any of the owners of the Twelve Possessed.

Or so he thought.

“Hohoh Maniwa is the exception—right? So you’re saying that his personality...

the sociable side of his personality, originally came from Emonzaemon?"

That must have been—what Hohoh wanted.

More than ninpo or anything else—he wanted sociability?

"It would seem so." Togame nodded approvingly. "I've already mentioned how in this age of peace and order, the Maniwa have steadily been losing power. Remember that?"

"Yeah. That's why those guys stabbed you in the back. When you put it that way, it almost sounds like you might feel a little sympathy for them."

"I feel no sympathy."

On that Togame was clear.

It would seem her grudge against the Maniwa was deeply rooted.

"You see, the biggest reason for their loss of power and their impending ruin—is that they lacked adequate leadership."

"How is that even possible? I mean, don't they have twelve bosses?"

"Having twelve people in charge is exactly what I call bad leadership...a vestige of the times of chaos. Sure, back then, it was a fine idea—actually, when they instituted the Twelve-Boss System, it was a revolutionary¹³ concept. As a matter of fact, soon after introducing the Twelve-Boss System, they finally destroyed the Aioi Clan, with whom they had been warring for generations.¹⁴ Without question, that arrangement makes the most of the band of social misfits that is the Maniwa. However—in these times of peace and order, it loses its efficacy."

"So without a leader, the organization broke down?"

"Yep. In fact, because the Onmitsu have such strong leadership, they remain

prosperous up to the present day—strictly speaking, at the present moment, they have fallen out of favor with the bakufu, their employer, but only because they were dragged down by the Maniwa.”

The Maniwa, that band of miscreants.

Whose personalities were broken as their organization.

Perhaps that was par for the course.

A case of having no one but themselves to blame.

“Thing is, Hohoh Maniwa sought to prevent this—which drove him to acquire an unbroken personality. And Emonzaemon Soda paid the toll.”¹⁵

“ ... ”

To be sure.

Bearing in mind—the personalities of Hohoh Maniwa and Emonzaemon Soda.

These two men were much of a muchness. So much so, though not to the extent of Rinne Higaki, the hermit magus they had met last month—it was almost as if one were the reflection of the other, in a mirror.

“The Princess made it sound like Hohoh Maniwa and Emonzaemon had some kind of a history,” Shichika said. “This must be what she meant. I guess it goes beyond the feud between the Maniwa and the Aioi.”

“Sure...but whether the Princess knows the entire story is unclear. Just goes to show you how slovenly and negligent a personality she has—she could care less about the past of Emonzaemon. That said, this doesn’t necessarily explain the grudge Emonzaemon has against the Maniwa.”

“Why not?”

“If Emonzaemon was apt to hold a grudge like that, Hohoh would not have

desired his personality. Which must have been exactly what inclined the Princess to make Emonzaemon her confidant, regardless of his past. Well, then,” Togame made it sound like they were finished. “It feels like we’ve been traveling for quite some time—but from the looks of it, we have a decent ways to go before arriving in Iga. It could take three days, maybe four.”

“Okay. No way of knowing how long Hohoh will stay put. We better hurry.”

“Hmph—based on what we heard from Penguin, I see no cause for alarm...but there’s two sides to every coin,¹⁶ Shichika. This goes back to what I told you earlier. Depending on the interpretation,¹⁷ Hohoh going berserk might be a good thing for us after all.”

“You sure? I doubt it’s gonna be as bad as when a swordsman has one of the swords, but from what I can remember about Komori Maniwa, the combo of a ninja and a Shikizaki blade...is not a good thing, any way you look at it.”

“Yes, but now that he’s been poisoned by the venom, he no longer has access to the personality he stole from Emonzaemon.”

This was how the Schemer viewed the situation.

“If there’s anything I find scary about Hohoh Maniwa, it’s something about his personality. His way of being so at ease, despite being a member of the Maniwa, is what made him so menacing. But now that he lacks this menace—fighting him should be a walk in the park. Granted,” Togame admitted, “you’re the one who has to fight him. We were bound to have a showdown with the Maniwa sooner or later. This isn’t such an awful way to have to go about it. We can take down Hohoh Maniwa and capture Dokuto the Basilisk at the same time.”

“Dokuto the Basilisk...” Shichika spoke with an air of emotion. “Here we are,

at the eleventh sword. When we were starting out, every time we got another sword, I felt anxious about the next—but at this point, it feels like the journey's almost over. Not like it'll be smooth sailing here on out,¹⁸ but still."

"I see your point."

Thus far, whenever Shichika let slip an optimistic comment such as this, Togame chided him or worse—and part of Shichika expected her to do so now, but things were different.

"You're right. Our Sword Hunt is coming to an end."

"Huh?"

Even though this was essentially what Shichika had said, Togame's response was so uncharacteristic that he stopped dead in his tracks. Togame realized this a few steps down the road and turned around.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"No, nothing—it just startled me, hearing you say the journey's almost over—you've mentioned that a couple times now. Like at the inn."

"Hm? Oh, now that you mention it, I suppose I did. But it's the honest truth—there's no use getting worked up about it. Once we've laid hands on Dokuto the Basilisk, the Sword Hunt is as good as done."

"Whoa, whoa. Isn't that a bit of an exaggeration? What about the twelfth and final sword, Ento the Bead? We still don't know where it is or who actually has it."

In an unlikely reversal, Shichika found himself the one berating Togame for getting ahead of the game. However—

"Wrong," Togame negated his remark. "I think it's safe to guess where we can

find Ento the Bead.”

“Huh?”

“Likewise its owner.”

After speaking thus, Togame turned herself straight ahead and started walking—leaving Shichika to hurry up and take his place alongside her.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Safe to assume that Princess Negative has claimed Ento the Bead.” Togame said this facing straight ahead. “Or to be precise, she’s sharing it with Emonzaemon Soda—see?”

“Wha... Those two? They never let on like they had it.”

“Because they have no reason to... Honestly, Shichika, you need to learn to doubt people a little more.”

“And you need to learn to trust people a little more, Togame.”

Togame glared at Shichika, mildly peeved¹⁹ at this rare rejoinder, but she declined to make a comment, and instead changed the subject.

“Remember what the Princess said, last time we saw her in Owari? How Emonzaemon Soda put an end to Umigame Maniwa.”

“Yeah,” acknowledged Shichika. “Sure, I remember that. You were talking about how the Maniwacs are dropping left and right,²⁰ behind our backs.”

Since as a general rule, Togame the Schemer did not believe a single word that Princess Negative uttered, she had not swallowed this particular statement whole; but in light of what Penguin Maniwa had told them, her information had not been contradictory.

At this point, it may as well be viewed as fact.

“I can understand Oshidori Maniwa. She stood between Emonzaemon and his directive from the Princess to assassinate Hohoh Maniwa—but not so for Umigame Maniwa. According to Penguin, Umigame was killed before the assassination was ordained.”

“The Maniwa Ninjas didn’t just betray you. Aren’t they considered traitors by the entire bakufu? I don’t see anything too crazy about a bakufu person like Emonzaemon killing off Umigame Maniwa.”

“Emonzaemon may work under Princess Negative, but I would hesitate to call him bakufu personnel—hence what makes him her confidant. Barring explicit orders from the Princess, he will not act gratuitously.”

Therefore.

There must be a reason that killing Umigame was not gratuitous.²¹

“So you’re saying this wasn’t about Emonzaemon...so much as Princess Negative? You mean...the Princess had some kind of a reason for killing Umigame Maniwa?”

“Correct. There was a specific reason, *particular* to Umigame Maniwa, among the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa...that made killing him imperative. We could also say: having killed off Umigame Maniwa, the Princess found it necessary to kill off Hohoh Maniwa as well.”

“And you think her reason for killing Umigame Maniwa...involved Ento the Bead?”

“Of course.”

“Sure—I remember now. After making their agreement with us, the Maniwa went after Seito the Garland, Dokuto the Basilisk, and Ento the Bead. Hohoh and Penguin were in charge of capturing the Basilisk...while Oshidori and

Umigame were each in charge of one of the other swords, right? I guess Umigame must have been trying to find the Bead—wait. Do you think that Emonzaemon attacked Umigame after he found it?”

“That’s how it looks to me,” agreed Togame. “If you think about it, the Princess has been aggressive about this Sword Hunt all along—it would not remotely surprise me if her plan was to claim at least one of the swords as her own. In fact, perhaps she felt that one of the swords—would be more than enough.”

“ ... ”

“At this point, it would be difficult to imagine any reason she would want to kill one of the Maniwa that did not somehow involve the Sword Hunt—all the more so if Emonzaemon is the one doing the killing. Thus...it stands to reason that Princess Negative has Ento the Bead.”

In actuality, Togame’s evaluation differed from reality significantly.

Umigame Maniwa was killed by Emonzaemon Soda before the boss could reach Ento the Bead—for Emonzaemon Soda had acquired it long before he killed Umigame.

That said, though her evaluation had its flaws—Togame was essentially correct about the current owners of Ento the Bead.

“Alright...but why would the Princess hide that from us? If she has it, why not say so?”

“Your head is such a simple, pleasant place. As long as she has one of the Twelve Possessed, she maintains the potential to negotiate with us—and if she plays her cards right, she could steal all of the credit for herself. Her strategy is identical to that taken by the Maniwa. Though I suspect that the Princess is

after more than just the credit—she may well be plotting to destroy me in the process.”

“She sure has tricked you plenty of times already.”

“What, all of that? What you have seen so far is child’s play for her—when that woman gets down to business,²² it will be nothing like the games you’ve seen so far. Same goes for me, of course—in any case, if our final enemy is Princess Negative, that’d be just the usual for me.”

“Just the usual?”

“Indeed.” Togame grinned slightly and continued, “Hence why I said the journey of our Sword Hunt is nearly over.”

“Over²³—huh.”

“As long as Emonzaemon and the Princess have Ento the Bead, it must be in Owari, which means that Iga will be our final venue on the road. But don’t worry, on top of New Maniwa, Iga has all kinds of things to offer. It’s a great place for us to round things off.”

“Yeah...”

Shichika did his best to go along with it.

She hardly sounded like the usual Togame, but if she was correct, and Ento the Bead had already been captured by the bakufu (albeit by her political rival), Dokuto the Basilisk would essentially be their final sword. Which would explain her sounding out of character, mused Shichika—but her next line knocked the wind right out of him.

“Hey, Shichika. Once this journey is over, would you be inclined to stay with me?”

There it was. Togame said it.

“Unlike Princess Negative, I’ve never had a confidant or right-hand man for an extended span of time—I have people working under me in the Military Directorate, but no one I can trust. Developing that kind of confidence would only interfere with my ambitions.”

“...”

“I’ve made a habit of sabotaging any professional or personal relationships before they go too far—which includes my several attempts to defeat²⁴ the Princess, in the name of self-preservation²⁵—but I never want to do the same to you.”

After she spoke.

Togame stopped midstride.

Shichika gazed at her expression—as if conscious of his scrutiny, she spun away.

But she continued.

“At first, I planned for you to be my partner only for the Sword Hunt—but now that I no longer have the Maniwa or Hakuhei Sabi, I need your strength. To help me in my rise to prominence.”²⁶

“Togame—”

“Though the Sword Hunt is coming to an end—my battles are far from over. Depending on how things turn out, it may be even harder once we’ve captured all the swords—I’m going to need your strength. And I’m going to need the reassurance that I feel, being around you. Therefore, Shichika Yasuri—” Togame said, still turned away. “I want you to become my confidant.”





“I dunno...”

Shichika stammered, faced with this unexpected development, and this unexpected assertion from Togame.

When Togame had finished the Sword Hunt, what was she planning to do?

Specifically—when the Sword Hunt was over, what would she do with Shichika?

This question had been bothering Shichika for as long as he could remember.

“I am the son of Mutsue Yasuri.”

“Right.”

“Mutsue Yasuri—who killed your father.”

“Right,” Togame answered perfunctorily. “So what?” she asked. “It’s not like you’re the one who killed him. The second that Mutsue Yasuri died, he purged my animosity for the Kyotoryu.”

“...”

“Especially considering how you killed Mutsue with your bare hands...but regardless, what reason would I have to hold a grudge against you? Please, don’t tell me you’ve been hung up on something so absurd—”

Togame snickered, turning her body toward Shichika.

To get an eyeful of him.

Because of their difference in height, this meant looking up at him from below.

“So what will it be?”

“It’s not like I have a home to return to. My sister is dead...why would I want

to go back to Haphazard Island? If you still want to retain²⁷ me, I can't think of anything better."

"Then we're set."

Togame said this almost casually.

She turned ahead and started walking—and Shichika followed.

Suddenly.

Togame held her hand out for Shichika to take.

And when he scratched his head, she frowned.

"What are you doing, you nincompoop?" she asked. "When a confidant is walking with his master, he holds her hand."

"Oh, really? I can't imagine Emonzaemon and Princess Negative doing that."

"Those two are the exception. They won't even face each other."

"Okay."

Though Togame had not entirely cleared things up for Shichika, he did as he was told and took her hand.

And so they walked off, hand in hand.

If anyone was the exception—it was the two of them; no matter how you looked at it, it wasn't the usual arrangement for a master and her confidant—but this was beyond Shichika.

"I gotta admit, I definitely wasn't expecting you to say that out of nowhere. I figured you would wait until the very end, so that we wouldn't lose our sense of urgency²⁸ or focus."

"Just think how much you've changed in the past year," Togame said. "You've

learned of people and the world, gained knowledge and a purpose. You’ve grown a lot. And I’m going through some changes too, after a year of traveling, though not as much as you. This trip has given me the chance to do a lot of things I’ve never done before. Just last month, we met a hermit magus!”



And so, as the duo headed straight for Iga—Shichika had no way of²⁹ knowing. He may have learned of people and the world—but he had no way of knowing. He may have gained knowledge and a purpose, and he may have grown—but he had no way of knowing.

As has been the case for all travelers throughout history—he had no way of knowing that when the journey ends, it brings an end to everything.

¹ 東海道 TŌKAIDŌ “road along the eastern sea”

² 灯台下暗し TŌDAI MOTO KURASHI “dark at the base of the lighthouse”

³ 関西圏 KANSAI KEN “Kansai region” populous area in western-central Japan ⁴ 北陸地方 HOKURIKU CHIHŌ “northern lands” coastal region in northern-central Japan ⁵ 精巧 SEIKŌ delicate, exquisite ⁶ もっともらしく MOTTOMO RASHIKU comprehendingly ⁷ 一長一短 ICCHŌ ITTAN “one long (for) one short”

⁸ 統率者 TŌSOTSU SHA “person who unites through command”

⁹ 胴体 DŌTAI torso

¹⁰ 五体満足 GOTAI MANZOKU “(all) five body parts satisfactory”

¹¹ 殺した KOROSHITA killing, in the sense of stifling ¹² おまけ OMAKE lagniappe; something given for free, usually with a purchase ¹³ 画期的 KAKKITEKI epochal

¹⁴ 長年 NAGANEN “long years”

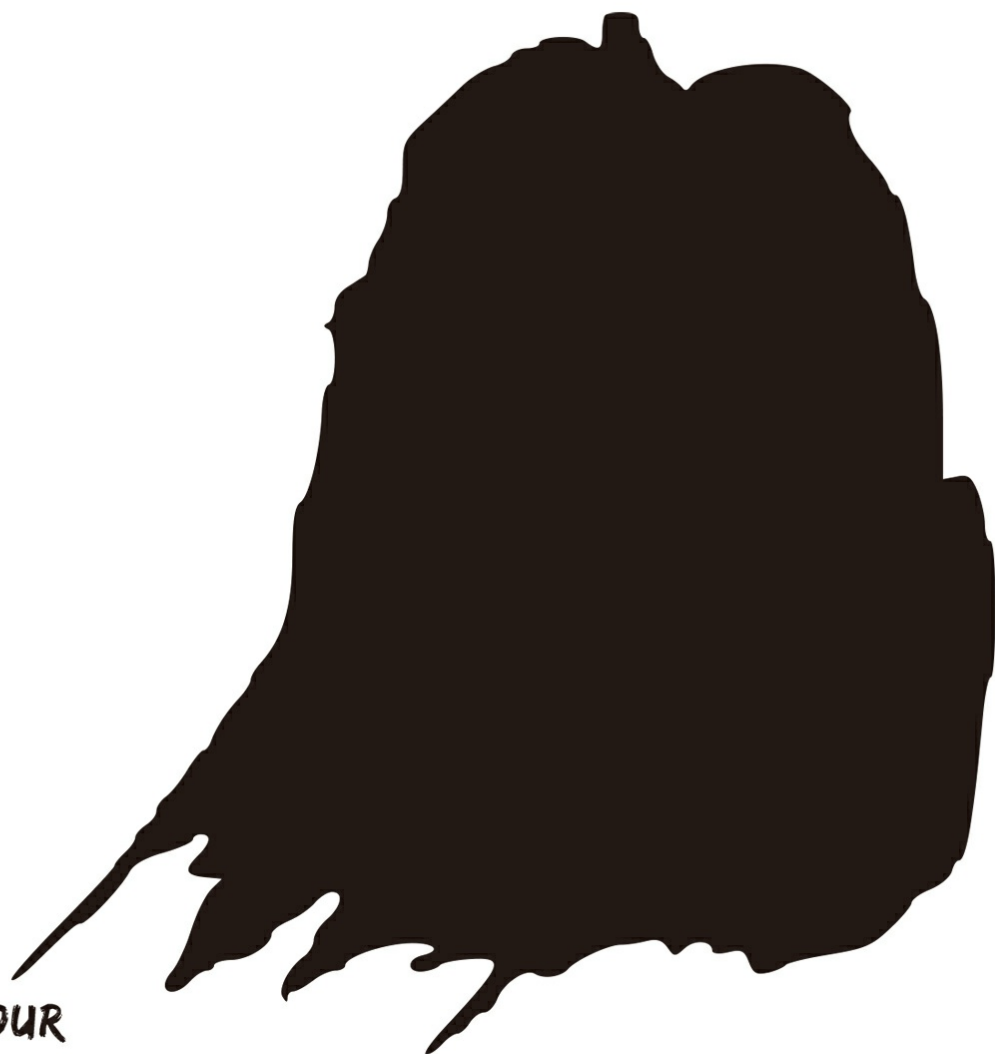
¹⁵ その犠牲者だった SONO GISEISHA DATTA was the victim ¹⁶ ものは考えよう MONO WA KANGAEYŌ it all depends on how one thinks of it ¹⁷ 取りよう TORIYŌ way of taking things ¹⁸ 順風満帆 JUNPŪ MANPAN “steady wind, full sails”

¹⁹ 不快そうに FUKAISŌ NI showing displeasure ²⁰ どんどん DON DON onomatopoeia for steady progression or regression ²¹ 無駄 MUDA futile; irrelevant ²² 本腰を入れ HONGOSHI WO IRE “properly sink one’s hips” *i.e.* brace, hustle ²³ 終わり OWARI The End pun on 尾張 OWARI ²⁴ 蹴落とそうと KEOTO SŌTO “trying to kick down”

²⁵ 保身 HOSHIN “maintaining one’s body (i.e. person)”

²⁶ のし上がっていく NOSHI AGATTE IKU in order to climb up (the ranks) ²⁷ 雇い続けてくれる YATOI TSUZUKETE KURERU would continue to employ ²⁸ 緊張感 KINCHŌKAN “feeling of tension”

²⁹ よし YOSHI reason, grounds for



CHAPTER FOUR

LUCKY PUCKS



“So—he got away. That man in the mask.”

The figure spoke.

Looking like Hohoh Maniwa—sounding like Hohoh Maniwa.

The figure spoke.

“Quicker than I thought—I really hoped to kill him. He must barely be injured. It only took a few hundred years, but I guess we have decent warriors now—thank goodness.”

And with the eyes of Hohoh Maniwa—

The figure gazed upon the prostrate body of Penguin Maniwa.

As if gazing upon something truly disagreeable.

“Then again...not everybody here’s a decent warrior. Well...I suppose it’s for the best? After all, I hoped to kill him too. Hey, bucko—can you hear me?”

There was no reply.

Forget the gash across his chest—this was pure fear.

Penguin was terrified—physically incapable of summoning his voice.

“You stay put, on the ground—I’m sure someone will come and help you soon. And whoever it is, you can tell them—I’ll be waiting in Iga.”

With that—

The figure swung¹ the sword, to shake the blood away²—and with a single swing, the blood of Penguin that was clinging to the blade went flying.

The black blade.

Dokuto the Basilisk.

The figure rested the bare blade upon a shoulder.

“I’ll be waiting there to *test my sword out*³—haha. The Maniwa Clan, that band of expert assassins. I never would have thought that oddities like them, an accident of history, would last this long—evidently the Aioi Clan met their ruin first. I have to admit, they’ve done quite well for themselves. In any case...”

Looking like Hohoh Maniwa.

Sounding like Hohoh Maniwa.

This *thing*—spoke.

“Perfect for testing out my sword.”

“Ho-Hohoh!”

“Hohoh? I’m not Hohoh.”

Said the *figure*.

“The name is Kiki Shikizaki.”

“Whahhhhh!”

Back at the inn, on the outskirts of Dewa.

In a room on the second floor—Penguin Maniwa sat up, shrieking wildly.

“Oh, oh oh...n-nightmares,” he murmured—in a shaky voice.

Murmuring as his entire body shook—although in actuality, this was no dream.

Not a dream—exaggerated as it may have been, this was reality.

Although only a memory.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...ugh.”

Realizing he was drenched with sweat, he used the tenugui resting by his futon to wipe his face and neck.

Nightmares⁴ every time he slept.

Being awake was hard enough—but being asleep was even worse. What’s more, his body needed rest so badly he could only stay awake each day for a short time—but somehow, he had begun showing signs of recovery.

“...”

Penguin tossed aside the counterpane⁵ and scanned the room.

No one there.

The Schemer—and the Kyotoryu had left the inn several days before. Slinking away while Penguin was asleep.

Not like they owed him a goodbye; after all, they were enemies—asking the two of them for help could potentially be seen as an act of treason against the Maniwa.

Perhaps he would be denounced by his fallen comrades.

And yet.

The order came from Hohoh Maniwa—

No, not from Hohoh Maniwa.

For Hohoh Maniwa—had gone berserk.

He had no obligation to fulfill such an order.

However—

“The Schemer?”

Upon leaving the inn, Togame handed the innkeeper a sack of money, asking them to look after Pengin, allowing him to continue his recuperation even after they had gone—

—Togame the Schemer.

—This isn't like her.

“I can understand why you would save me, in exchange for information... clearly I posed no threat to you, cut down by that katana. Still...why didn't you kill me?”

He stood and stashed the folded futon in the closet.

Though he had yet to make a full recovery—he could not stick around this place and convalesce forever.

Indulging in the graces of the Schemer went against his pride as one of the Twelve Bosses—he couldn't let the Schemer and the Kyotoryu save Hohoh on their own.⁶

Not when he was finally able to move around.

Which meant that he should make a move.

He had to catch up with those two.

“Berserk—that’s what I call berserk!”

Though his nervous tendencies persisted when he was alone—his voice stopped shaking when he was talking to himself.

Pengin murmured in a robust tone.

As if sorting out his thoughts.

“That she-devil—sure is opportunistic.”⁷

Frankly, Pengin had been ready.

After giving his account of Hohoh Maniwa, Dokuto the Basilisk, and Emonzaemon Soda, thus exhausting his usefulness to the Schemer—he was certain they would kill him.

He did his best to prevent this from happening—clinging to a great deal of the vital information—but he was sure that in the end, he could not prevent them from killing him.

And he was fine with that.

If it meant rescuing Hohoh—he could abide.

And yet.

The Schemer declined to so much as scratch Pengin.

Tending to his wounds and asking for the others to look after him.

This went beyond letting the enemy regroup⁸—she had underwritten the enemy’s recuperation.⁹

Even if she had been reluctant to take his life, she would have done well to

break one of his arms or lop off a leg, rendering him unfit for battle, but she did not.

The old Schemer—would have done so.

The Schemer that Penguin knew—back in her honeymoon¹⁰ phase with the Maniwa Ninja Clan, would have done so in a heartbeat. He was sure of it.

Komori Maniwa had touched upon this once.

“That woman—is rotten to the core.¹¹ Everything she does is calculated, from her demeanor to her choice of words. To her, the Maniwa are just another part of the equation. It’s truly no laughing matter.”

This was coming from Komori Maniwa, the ninja with whom Togame the Schemer had worked together most.

As far as Penguin was concerned, his word was credible.

Besides, in view of all the Schemer’s other strategies to date—the thought of letting Penguin Maniwa live to see another day was unbelievable.

It could only mean one thing.

“Has the Kyotoryu...transformed the Schemer?”

Most of his dialogue had been with the Schemer.

As a result, Penguin had barely exchanged words with the Kyotoryu—though from their brief exchanges, he had gleaned a certain understanding.

Remember, Penguin was a ninja.

Able to sense—the personality of the Kyotoryu.

“Whatever...at this point, no use fixating on the Schemer. Any way you look at it, I gotta chase them down,” Penguin told himself, as he changed from his

nightclothes into his ninja garb. “I gotta head back to Maniwa.”

New Maniwa.

Their new home base in Iga, to which the bosses had made a pact¹² not to return until the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki were theirs—but now Penguin would have to break his vow.

Especially since Hohoh, the one who had proposed the pact—was already physically present in the very place to which they vowed not to return.

Penguin reached for the fusuma.

But before his hand could reach it—the fusuma flew open.

Someone had opened it from the hallway.

It had to be an inn worker.

Coming up to check on Penguin—but this would never do. He had planned to leave the inn in secret, but his timing had been off—and yet.

His guess was wrong.

Beyond the open fusuma, he beheld no worker.

*“—Impasse.”*¹³

But a bemasked gentleman, standing in the doorway—

Emonzaemon Soda, speaking in a voice Penguin had heard before, and could never forget.

“Whahhhhh!”

Pengin Maniwa—shrieked once again.

Though this time, shrieking at the present situation, neither a memory nor an embellishment thereof—he flew across the room and pressed his back against the wall.

Showing little interest in the way Pengin responded, the bemasked gentleman—Emonzaemon Soda made his way into the room, closing the fusuma soundlessly behind him.

The words “NON-NINJA” scrawled across his mask.

Making his face impossible to read.

Nay—if the Decapitation Cycle had indeed originally been his ninpo, then there should be no face behind the mask at all.

How could there be?

Since Emonzaemon appeared to be in perfect shape, what body part could Hohoh have stolen from him—other than his face?

In any case, it was a horrific thought.¹⁴

Not Hohoh stealing his face.

In that moment.

The moment when Hohoh finally went berserk.

His manner toward the one who stole his face—the way Emonzaemon Soda comported himself faced with Hohoh, was what seemed exceedingly horrifying.

He was so exceedingly calm.

Most people—would display scorn or hatred, or perhaps despair.

Why not he?

[illegible]

Pengin was moaning—but true to his profession,¹⁵ and one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa, he made a rapid observation of his foe.

Noting any differences from the last time.

The shoulder of his suit jacket—had been slashed.

Exposing the skin of his shoulder—wounded by the katana.

The wound Hohoh Maniwa had given him with Dokuto the Basilisk.

Pengin had a similar gash across his chest—but the wound suffered by Emonzaemon was superficial.

When he took the blow, it looked like he was spraying blood—but Emonzaemon must have narrowly¹⁶ evaded a more serious injury.

And on his hip—was no pair of swords.

He must not have had the chance to recover the two blades that he had willfully flung by the wayside. Based on the fact he had not bothered to procure new swords—

He could not be a swordsman.

The man called himself a former ninja, but if you asked Pengin, he was as fine

a ninja as they came—down to his fleetfooted escape.

“Undiscovered.”

Emonzaemon craned his neck and looked around the room, as if having no interest in Penguin whatsoever—then spoke quietly.

“No sign of the Schemer or the Kyotoryu—we must have missed each other. Too bad—but no matter. The two of them are walking. If I run, I’ll catch up with them in no time—”

“Uh, uh, uh.”

“—Either way, assuming you’ve provided them with all of the essential information, like New Maniwa being in Iga, and Hohoh Maniwa having gone berserk and fled there on account of Dokuto the Basilisk—I suppose I can sit back and do nothing.”

“It-It—”

Penguin spoke in a shaky voice—though nevertheless resolute.

“It-It-It’s your fault that Hohoh—”

“My fault? I suppose you’re right.”

Penguin was about to blow, but Emonzaemon viewed him with equanimity.

“Though you can hardly disparage me for that—when you and I are enemies.”

“...”

“As an agent of the Owari Bakufu, and as an agent of the Aioi Clan, I regard the Maniwa as enemies. Not to say I hold some kind of grudge against the Maniwa—” Emonzaemon added. “Both as a ninja, and as a former ninja—I have no personal agenda toward any of you. I have only a directive.”

“Wh-Where...h-have y-you been?”

Strange it had taken him so long to discover that Penguin was recuperating at the inn—showing up now, at this juncture, Emonzaemon was a little late.

“Did I not mention my main and actual mission?” asked Emonzaemon, by way of a response to Penguin’s question. “The way things are, assassinating Hohoh Maniwa is too much to ask¹⁷ of me...or more than should be asked. As Hohoh somehow felt the need to say himself, our powers are so equitable as to make rivalry impossible. Perhaps assassinating Hohoh Maniwa was too much for me from the beginning—”

“Equitable...”¹⁸

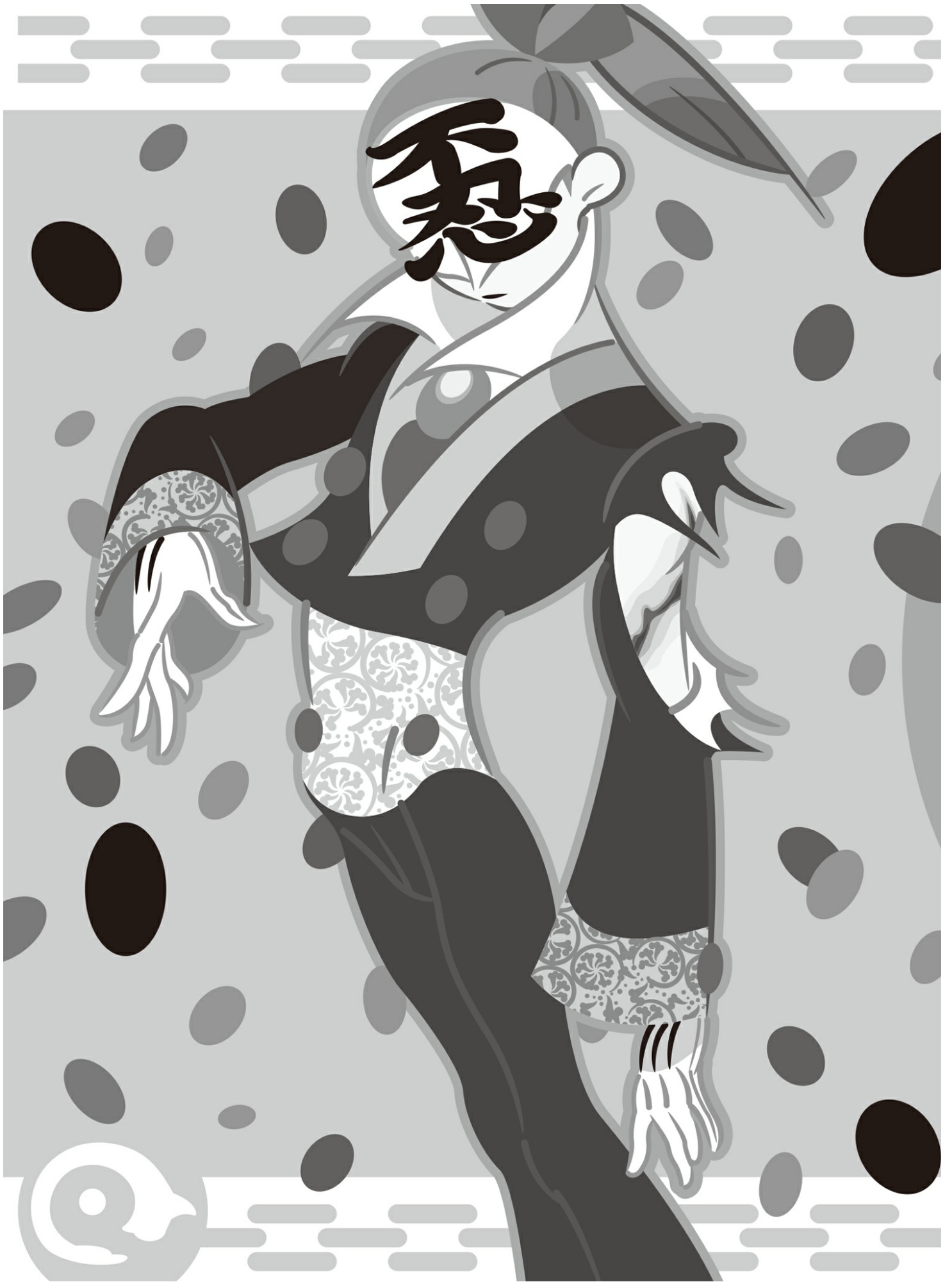
“As I was saying, I have decided to let the Schemer and the Kyotoryu deal with Hohoh Maniwa and Dokuto the Basilisk. Giving me a chance to focus on my main and actual mission. Though if you ask Princess Negative, it’s no more than an incidental errand.”

The main, actual mission—was an incidental errand?

What was this about?

While Penguin had his blinds spots about Togame the Schemer—he was in the dark when it came to Emonzaemon’s master, Princess Negative.

Her very personality.





Was beyond his ken—

But even if he knew more, there were other things to think about.

“And now that my errand has been taken care of, and I’m heading home, I thought that I might pay you a visit—since, incidentally, it was on the way.”

“In-Incidentally? O-On the way?”

“Listen, Penguin Maniwa,” said Emonzaemon. “Since you are just a child, some might say I should show some sympathy and let you go—but I would disagree.”

When Emonzaemon spoke these words, Penguin remembered how the Schemer had behaved. Had she shown him sympathy and let him go—because he was a child?

Hard to say.

He could not say; and yet the man before him.

Emonzaemon Soda—had made it clear that he was not inclined to do so.

This man—

Planned to take out Penguin incidentally—as if running an errand¹⁹ on the way home.

“Though I have not been ordered to destroy you—allowing a nervous ninja such as yourself to survive could only cause me trouble down the line.²⁰ It is not in the best interests of the Princess. Now that Hohoh Maniwa has gone berserk—it’s time for the Maniwa Clan to meet its ruin. A decision resting solely on my shoulders though it may be.”

With these words, Emonzaemon Soda thrust both hands into his jacket, crossing one arm over the other.

And when his hands emerged—they gripped two²¹ lumps of metal.

Not like Penguin had any chance of knowing what they were.

A revolver.

And an automatic.

How could he comprehend these weapons, when they should not even exist in this era?

Look at them.

How could he have known these were the implements that killed Oshidori Maniwa?

“Just as you attempted to disturb the equilibrium between me and Hohoh using Dokuto the Basilisk, I had hoped to disturb the equilibrium between me and Hohoh using Ento the Bead—I never would have thought a kid like you would steal a march on me.”

“B-Bead?”

Ento the Bead.

One of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

A process of elimination—would not be necessary to confirm this was the Shikizaki blade that Umigame Maniwa had been after—

“I thought that Hohoh Maniwa had a more cautious personality—since we do have the same personality and all. Regardless, your intrusion was most unexpected, Penguin Maniwa. Which is why I am not holding back when it comes to you. Alright, let’s show you what the Bead can do—”

“H-H-Huh???”

Pengin Maniwa had no preconceptions regarding Ento the Bead.

Even if the meaning of “Bead” were to be unpacked for him, he would fail to understand the workings of this weapon.

He was perplexed and discombobulated.²²

And without overlooking his bewilderment—Emonzaemon Soda activated²³ Ento the Bead.

Activate being no exaggeration.

Barely moving—but to pull the triggers on these lumps of metal.

Bang.

Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang.

The tinny sounds—rang through the room.

The echo strangely hollow and enormous.

Unlike Oshidori Maniwa, shot from behind, Pengin had been staring at Ento the Bead the moment it was fired—and seeing it in action, its workings were so simple it was baffling.

While small and short in barrel—

These lumps of metal had the firepower of flintlocks.

Able to launch²⁴ pellets²⁵ using explosive powder.

But these weapons were far more diabolical than any flintlock.

For one thing, they were handy.²⁶

And fired in rapid succession.

Every shot that Pengin Maniwa heard—meant one more bullet hurtling

towards him.

What happened to be going through his mind was Mitsubachi Maniwa, another of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa, late of the Bug Unit, and his Blunderbuzz, a form of ninpo bearing comparison to a firearm—but this was on another level. What was it? How on earth had these small lumps of metal been invested with such power?

It was commendable for Penguin to comprehend so much in but a fraction of a moment—but even so, he lacked the time to act.

This was a scene of total despair.

Forget escape, he could not move a muscle—

“Whuh?”

He could not move.

And yet—not one of the seven bullets unloaded by Ento the Bead so much as grazed his skin.

All seven shots landed²⁷ in the wall behind him.

“Whah?”

Emonzaemon Soda cried out with surprise—nay, with astonishment.

“I missed...or, did you make me miss?”

“No use,” said Penguin Maniwa. Though cowering—and shaking all over, his words were firm. “I’ve figured out what makes Ento the Bead tick... It doesn’t matter if this sword of yours can unload quicker and more precisely than the average²⁸ flintlock. As long as it fires projectiles, it’s useless against me.”

“...”

“That’s one of my ninpo moves—the Fate Blaster.”²⁹

Fate Blaster.

A move whose specialness³⁰ set it apart from all the Maniwa Ninpo—and the reason Penguin Maniwa, a child of few years, had been chosen out of all the ninjas in the village to be one of the Twelve Bosses.

Its power neither offensive nor defensive.

In a word—it was vitality.³¹

As you may have guessed, Togame the Schemer and Princess Negative were among those who rejected predestination³²—and while the Fate Blaster was based on this very notion, it served also, as the name suggests, to undermine the power of fate.

Penguin Maniwa—*was plain lucky.*

His luck was so incredible,³³ it left a dichotomy like having “good” or “bad” luck in the dust.

Contravening theory and reason.

Thwarting all attempts at logic, he was perpetually under a lucky star.

Consider—Umigame Maniwa.

Who had been unfortunate enough to wind up seeking the Bead—and on the flip side, check out Penguin, whose good fortune it was to seek, in tandem with Hohoh, the Basilisk.

One might say his good fortune was essential to the Maniwa discovering it.

Penguin Maniwa’s powers of reconnaissance, unrivaled by Komori Maniwa or Kawauso Maniwa—were likewise founded in the resilience of his luck.

In another of the endless sampling of examples—when Hohoh Maniwa went berserk and laid into Penguin, hoping to take his life, and Penguin failed to block the cut in any way, he managed to survive—for no reason other than the strength of his luck.

Strong enough—to blast through fate.

Hence the name Ninpo Fate Blaster.

“Right. I think I get the picture,” said Emonzaemon.

Just as Penguin had instantaneously understood the workings of Ento the Bead, Emonzaemon was able to surmise the nature of the ninpo used by Penguin Maniwa from the phenomenon which just took place, the circumstances of their last encounter,³⁴ and the nomenclature “Fate Blaster.”

Picture it all you want, thought Penguin. But once your fate is blasted, it will never be the same!

“Considering the deep resentment the Schemer harbors for the Maniwa Clan, it’s odd she let you live, especially in one whole piece—do we have the Fate Blaster to thank for that?”

“That’s not for me to say.”

Penguin took a defiant stance.

Though on the inside he was shaking uncontrollably as ever, he did his best to hide it.

This was the moment of truth.

If he was able to break through this impasse—not only would he be able to catch up with Hohoh in Iga: he could capture Ento the Bead from Emonzaemon Soda, however he had happened to become its owner.

Ento the Bead.

The ultimate souvenir for Hohoh Maniwa!

“What I will say is that no projectile, regardless of how much power is behind it, can get through to me. The bullets do the dodging for me.”

In a foreign folk tradition, there is a story of a king who sauntered proudly through a battlefield as arrows flew every which way around him—but the good fortune of Penguin Maniwa rivaled that of this fantastical king, in fact surpassing it.

Not even the most expert marksman³⁵ in Maniwa Village could pin³⁶ a shuriken on Penguin Maniwa. The Blunderbuzz of Mitsubachi Maniwa, which boasted one-hundred-percent accuracy, could not so much as graze his body. For Mitsubachi Maniwa, a bug who never missed his mark,³⁷ he was without exception the sole exception—lo, Penguin Maniwa.

“But just projectiles, huh?” asked Emonzaemon. “I get the feeling that this ninpo—is not so almighty³⁸ after all. If you have the power to blast through fate, how do you explain the mess you’re in? You never would have let Hohoh Maniwa go berserk, nor allowed him to cut you down with Dokuto the Basilisk.”

“...”

“For the record, even without projectiles—I have my ways of injuring you. In all your exultation,³⁹ have you forgotten? Aside from Ento the Bead, I have what Hohoh has decided to call the Decapitation Cycle—which I personally refer to as Endlessly Unsparing.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Penguin reassured him. “But I have my own tricks up my sleeve—they call me ‘Penguin the Breeder’ for good reason. Can you guess why?”

“Does it involve cloning yourself?”⁴⁰

“Not quite—but close.”

With that.

Pengin Maniwa pulled a weapon⁴¹ from his pocket. The Schemer and the Kyotoryu were kind enough⁴² to take leave of the inn without disarming him—

A black ellipsoid object.

Sized perfectly to fit into the palm of Pengin’s little hand.

It could not have been a blade—but neither could it be a shuriken.

Though certainly a weapon, it could only be described as a black ellipsoid object.

In fact, he held one in each hand—just as Emonzaemon wielded Ento the Bead.

“What the hell are those?”

“These are my Lucky Pucks.”⁴³

“Lucky what? This is the first I’ve seen or heard of such a weapon... Do you toss those trinkets at your enemy?”

“You got it!”

By way of a response to this snide remark, Pengin simultaneously released both weapons—both the Lucky Pucks, chucking them at Emonzaemon.

The dictionary definition of projectiles.

Compared to the bullets fired by Ento the Bead, their speed was astronomically—slower.

Dodging these two missiles⁴⁴ would be a cinch for Emonzaemon.

And yet.

“Whuh?”

The Lucky Pucks—homed in on Emonzaemon from behind.

Zooming past—and doubling back.

“Gah!”

Though it was not at all what you might call a cinch, Emonzaemon contorted himself and dodged them both—whereupon the Lucky Pucks came within inches of Penguin.

Blowing past him, and hitting the wall behind him—ricocheting.⁴⁵

Not round like normal pucks, but ellipsoid.

Hence, they ricocheted in random directions.

Off the wall, the ceiling, the floor, the fusuma, the shoji—the pair of Lucky Pucks could not be stopped,⁴⁶ boomeranging⁴⁷ across the room.

Dazzling boomerangs.

Blinding—boomerangs.

“Hey, these things—”

They did not merely ricochet.

Normally, when we say ricochet, we mean an object expends energy and slows down every time it bounces off a surface—but every time these Lucky Pucks made contact, they bounced away with ever greater speed. They may have been a little slow at first, but at this point, they flew so wildly that calling them “high speed” was no exaggeration.

High speed, or even *lightspeed*.⁴⁸

The Lucky Pucks were invested with unholy springiness.⁴⁹

Whereby.

As if cloned repeatedly, the first two Lucky Pucks, by dancing left and right, manifested as a hundred, then two hundred.

Hence the origins of the sobriquet “Penguin the Breeder”!

“Ugh...are you—”

Obviously.

In their rampant traversals of the room, the Lucky Pucks were hitting Emonzaemon Soda. By now too fast for him to dodge—or even to block. Had they maintained the speed they had when Penguin chuckled them, Emonzaemon might have been able to catch both Lucky Pucks; but catching an unknown enemy projectile barehanded would not have been a wise decision.

Although it would have been the right one.

At this point, the two Lucky Pucks—which, having multiplied, had become two hundred Lucky Pucks, were much too speedy for Emonzaemon to grasp. Soft and ellipsoid—they slapped him silly, endlessly colliding with his body.

Springy enough to bounce off even fusuma and shoji.

In their collisions with his body, they barely packed a punch.

And yet—Emonzaemon had been perfectly immobilized.

Besides, when all those little punches pile up—things change.

“Penguin Maniwa!”

Penguin, whom he addressed.

Stood amid the hurricane⁵⁰ of ricocheting Lucky Pucks—not moving a muscle.

The Lucky Pucks not even skimming his body.

On its own, this ninpo—Ninpo Lucky Pucks, amounted to a suicide⁵¹ maneuver, to be used in only the direst of circumstances. Employed indoors, in a cramped space, to incapacitate both friend and foe and even its practitioner—essentially, this ninpo was a way of buying time.

It had some things in common with a smokescreen.

But though their impacts added up, there was no way that the interior of the space, things like the fusuma and shoji, was more resilient than the human body—and so, as dazzling as they may be, the Lucky Pucks could hardly be lethal.⁵²

However.

In the hands of Penguin Maniwa, who at the same time practiced the Fate Blaster, things were different.

His Lucky Pucks not only dodged his body: their paths collided with the softer surfaces, like the fusuma and shoji—as infrequently as possible.

Whereby—in the hands of Penguin Maniwa, the Lucky Pucks were lethal after all!

Aimless as they may be—they yielded lethal results.

All thanks to Penguin Maniwa being lucky!

“Blending⁵³ an innately passive tactic like the Fate Blaster with an innately evasive tactic like the Lucky Pucks—very menacing. I’m beginning to see why you were chosen to be one of the Twelve Bosses, despite your age.”

Emonzaemon had given up trying to deflect or otherwise impede the Lucky Pucks that ricocheted around the room—he stared at Penguin as they washed

over him.

“Hate to break it to you, Penguin Maniwa—but you’re nothing special. Every generation has a handful of individuals loved by history—the darlings⁵⁴ of their age—”

“Huh?”

“Take Nanami Yasuri. You’re basically the Nanami Yasuri of the Maniwa Ninja Clan—just the thought of that gives me goosebumps... Once I let my thoughts get the better of me,⁵⁵ it really makes my skin crawl. These Lucky Pucks are one thing, but imagine what would have happened had Nanami Yasuri picked up your Fate Blaster using that Watch and Learn of hers—gives me the shivers. Still—”

Emonzaemon made no effort to evade the bouncing Lucky Pucks.

Why evade them—when he had Ento the Bead.

The revolver and the automatic.

He leveled them on Penguin Maniwa.

“No matter how beloved you are by the current era—are you certain that you’ll be loved by *the world centuries hence?*”

“Huh?”

“At the historical level—fate cannot be blasted through so easily.”

With that.

Emonzaemon Soda pulled the triggers on both firearms.

Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang.

Another seven shots, sending another flurry of bullets from the muzzles of the

guns.

Even at their current speed, the Lucky Pucks were outstripped by the bullets—but Penguin knew it was in vain.

If the hurricane of Lucky Pucks did not so much as graze his skin.

Seven bullets had no chance.

This was a sorry act of desperation.

“Ugh!”

And yet.

The instant Penguin Maniwa assured himself of victory—he felt a blow from behind.

Nay—to say he “felt” the blow is too tame of a locution.

The blow had force, like something sharp had been thrust into him.

Such a blow—had struck him three times over.

“...Huh...?”

“Three shots out of seven—not bad at all.” Even amid these developments, Emonzaemon spoke without the slightest difference in tone. “Of course, I owe this stroke of genius to your Lucky Pucks. Just like these two projectiles—”

Glancing at the Lucky Pucks continuing to ricochet around the room—and making no attempt to prevent them from striking him, Emonzaemon continued.

“I figured that *a ricocheting bullet* stood a decent chance of hitting you.”

“R-Ricochet?”⁵⁶

Baffled—Penguin spun around.

But he could not believe his eyes.

The Lucky Pucks were able to ricochet because of their extraordinary softness—whereas the bullets, surely made of iron or the like, could never possibly have bounced off of the walls, not at that speed.

Case in point, the first seven shots that Emonzaemon fired had all landed in the wall behind Penguin—

“...nkk, ahh!”

“*Impasse.*” Emonzaemon nodded, watching Penguin put it all together. “You got it. Jackpot.”⁵⁷ In this last fusillade, I was not aiming at you. Instead, I aimed at the seven bullets buried in the wall, after my first round⁵⁸—iron bounces off of iron. As a result, three of these seven bullets nailed you in the back. If your favor was everlasting, the ricocheting bullets would have come straight for me... but alas, it would seem your luck will run out at some point in the next few hundred years—”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you saying—”

“*No need.* You need not understand.”

With these words, Emonzaemon threw open the fusuma behind him—whereupon the two Lucky Pucks buzzing around the room flew out into the hallway. He promptly shut the fusuma to prevent the oval objects from reentering the room.

Penguin Maniwa.

Whose luck—had finally run out.

“Uh, uh, uh...”

Stood admirably upright—despite the sharp pains gnawing at his back.

Yet, unimpressed, Emonzaemon walked over to Pengin Maniwa.

“Since my bullets lost momentum in the ricochet, I doubt your wounds are fatal—I have to admit, you put up a good fight. Sit tight. I’ll finish the job.”

As promised, Emonzaemon shoved the muzzles⁵⁹ of both handguns into a stunned Pengin Maniwa’s mouth.⁶⁰

“I reckon your Fate Blaster is blasted out—but regardless, there’s no missing from a range like this. Well, Pengin Maniwa. If you have any last words, now’s your chance.”

“...”

Pengin Maniwa—

Shed a single tear from a dilated pupil.

“B-But...I don’t want to die,” he said. “I-I didn’t—even want to fight.”

Emonzaemon responded to these words with a huge sigh.

“Congratulations. You’re the first person in history to die after a sorry line like that.”

Enjoying the last word.

Emonzaemon pulled the trigger.

Merciless gunshots⁶¹ resounded⁶² through the room.



The Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa.

Had been reduced to one.

And that one boss—had gone berserk.

¹ ぶん BUN onomatopoeia for a heavy object slicing air ² 血振り CHIBURUI “blood swing” waving a sword to clear the blade of blood ³ 試し斬り TAMESHI GIRI “trial cut” trying out a new sword on a human body ⁴ うなされる UNASARERU made to groan (in a feverish state) common metonym for nightmares ⁵ 掛け布団 KAKEBUTON comforter ⁶ 任せっぱなし MAKASEPPANASHI entrust (a task) entirely ⁷ ひよる HIYORU “watch the weather” waiting for the right moment ⁸ 敵に塩を送る TEKI NI SHIO WO OKURU “send salt to the enemy” aid and abet one’s foes ⁹ 金銀財宝を送りつけた KINGIN ZAIHŌ WO OKURI TSUKETA “delivered hoards of gold and silver”

¹⁰ 蜜月 MITSU GETSU literally “honey moon”

¹¹ 腹ん中 HARAN’NAKA “in the belly” an ironic accusation, coming from Komori ¹² 誓い CHIKAI pledge, oath ¹³ 不行 IKAZU “not going”

¹⁴ 想像 SŌZŌ imagination

¹⁵ しのびの端くれ SHINOBI NO HASHIKURE “a scrap of ninja”

¹⁶ ぎりぎり GIRI GIRI “cutting it close” onomatopoeia for being down to the wire ¹⁷ 手に負えない TE NI OENAI “cannot be carried in the hands”

¹⁸ 拮抗 KIKKŌ vying; comparable (skill levels) ¹⁹ 駄賃 DACHIN short

money (for a small task) ²⁰ 後々に ATO ATO NI later on ²¹ 一對の ITTSUI NO “one pair of”

²² 混乱 困惑 KONRAN KONWAKU confused distraught ²³ 発動 HATSUDŌ set in motion ²⁴ 発射 HASSHA “send shooting” fire ²⁵ 弾丸 DANGAN “round shot”

²⁶ 携帯性 KEITAISEI portable *e.g.* 携帯電話 KEITAI DENWA cell phone ²⁷ めり込んだ MERIKONDA sank, burrowed ²⁸ 既存 KIZON extant

²⁹ 運命崩し UNMEI KUZUSHI “crumbling destiny”

³⁰ 希少性 KISHŌSEI rareness

³¹ 生命力 SEIMEI RYOKU “power of life”

³² 運命論 UNMEIRON fatalism: the idea that all events are preordained ³³ 強運 KYŌUN “strong” luck, as opposed to 悪運/幸運 AKU’UN/KŌUN bad vs. good fortune ³⁴ 対面 TAIMEN “meet faces” depending on context, 面 MEN can mean “face” or “mask”

³⁵ 名手 MEISHU “famed hand”

³⁶ 命中 MEICHŪ make a direct hit ³⁷ 獲物 EMONO prey

³⁸ 万能 BAN’NŌ “ten thousand abilities” good for all occasions ³⁹ 得意になって TOKUI NI NATTE becoming self-satisfied ⁴⁰ 分身の術 BUNSHIN NO JUTSU “self-division trick” a common trope of fictionalized ninjas ⁴¹ 得物 EMONO “trustworthy object” a preferred implement of destruction ⁴² ご丁寧にも GOTEINEI NIMO “most respectfully” (sarcastic) ⁴³ 柔球術 JŪKYŪJUTSU “art of the soft balls”

⁴⁴ 投擲物 TŌTEKIBUTSU “thrown objects”

45 反射する HANSHA SURU to reflect 46 縦横無尽 JŪŌ MUJIN
“uninhibited traversal” free range of motion 47 乱舞 RANBU “dance like
mad” sometimes used to describe swift swordplay 48 高速 光速 KŌSOKU
KŌSOKU “high velocity” “light velocity”

49 すさまじいまでの弾性 SUSAMAJII MADE NO DANSEI downright frightful
elasticity 50 嵐 ARASHI storm

51 自爆 JIBAKU “bomb oneself”

52 殺傷能力 SASSHŌ NŌRYOKU “ability to kill or wound”

53 連携 RENKEI in concert

54 寵児 CHŌJI “favorite child”

55 想像をたくましくする SŌZŌ WO TAKUMASHIKU SURU “empower the
imagination”

56 跳弾 CHŌDAN “bouncing ball (ammo)” the standard term, reserved
until now in original 57 大当たり ŌATARI “big hit” the exact right answer
puns on 当たる ATARU get hit 58 銃撃 JŪGEKI gunfire

59 銃口 JŪKŌ “gun mouth”

60 口 KUCHI mouth

61 銃声 JŪSEI “gun voice”

62 反響 HANKYŌ echo shares initial character with 反射 HANSHA reflect

The background of the page is white, featuring several large, expressive black ink splatters and brushstrokes. One large, horizontal, irregular black shape is positioned in the upper left quadrant. Another smaller, more jagged black shape is located to its right. In the lower left, there is a black shape with a small white notch. The bottom of the page is dominated by a large, dark, textured area that looks like a heavy brushstroke or a large ink blot, with some lighter, streaky areas within it.

CHAPTER FIVE

KIKI
SHIKIZAKI

■ ■

“Ah...Boss Hohoh!”

“Welcome home.”

“Back for a visit?”

“It’s great to see that you’re alive and well.”

“We couldn’t wait to have you come home.”

“Boss, have you had any success?”

“Does this mean...that you’re here to stay?”

“But what became of all the others?”

“Boss, what’s up with the sword?”

“Boss.”

“Boss...”

“Boss Hohoh?”

The man answered.

With a flash of his katana.

“The name is Kiki Shikizaki.”



Togame the Schemer and Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, arrived in Iga at the end of the eleventh moon.¹ They had hurried up as much as possible, but on account of inclement weather, it took them quite a bit of time.

And yet.

Had they, blessed with clement weather, arrived in Iga one or two days, even a week earlier—reaching the enclave tucked between the hills where Penguin told them they would find New Maniwa, it would have had no impact whatsoever; even Shichika could see.

New Maniwa.

Shichika had no idea where Old Maniwa had been—but regardless.

The way they found it, this place was too far gone to call a village.

From their first step into town—a rude stench filled their noses.

Something foul.²

The stench—of rotting flesh and blood.

Lake Fuyo, the Level One Disaster Area which had been their destination in the eighth moon of the year—that godforsaken place, piled high with all manner of refuse, reeked horribly in its own right—but this was something else entirely.

Lake Fuyo was devoid of people.

Sure it smelled, but not the smell of corpses.³

Whereas—on this day in New Maniwa, corpses were the only thing that you could smell.

“Togame—”

“So this is what he meant by *test his sword*,” Togame stopped Shichika mid-sentence with a raised hand. “We’re going in.”

“...Okay.”

And so the two headed into the village.

Along the way—the situation of the village became clear.

All around them, as if set up like props—bodies had been cast aside like ragdolls.

No attempts to clean up.

Arms and legs flung from their bodies.

There was no need to conduct a sweep, peering into each and every house—no one could have possibly survived.

Though Shichika was unequipped to gauge the exact progress of the putrefaction,⁴ the rot had set in far enough for him to guess without a doubt the village had been sacked a couple weeks before.

Blood. Flesh.

Putrid.

Maniwa Village—had been annihilated beyond belief.

The only question was by whom.

But this, too, could be easily guessed.

“But how could—what the hell?”

“Not like your sister has a monopoly⁵ on annihilating villages. Still...”

Scanning the scenery, Togame did not slow her pace, but pain had crept into her tone of voice, and soon she let her eyes fall shut.

“...He murdered everyone,⁶ not just the ninjas from the village, but women and children, obvious civilians. He took no chances, acting thoroughly...hardly what I’d call berserk.”

Exactly as Togame said—the rash of corpses included many who were not dressed in the ninja garb, that esoteric getup that was the trademark of the Maniwa.

Villagers lay mown down everywhere they looked, wherever their eyes fell.

“According to the latest records of the bakufu, fifty people in all lived in Maniwa Village—minus the Twelve Bosses, that leaves thirty-eight. What do you say, Shichika? Shall we tally up the corpses?”

“I don’t really see a reason.”

“Fair point.”

Togame smiled ruefully and walked ahead, taking care to avoid the spilt blood that had stained the ground.

Not so large, as villages go.

Should be easy enough to find him.

All they had to do was find somebody on the move.

Or even somebody upright—and they would know.

“All the bloodstains make it hard to tell—but it looks like this village was really poor,” observed Togame.

“We knew the Maniwa had fallen on hard times, but this is worse than I imagined.”

Perhaps the fallen bodies slumped around them enhanced this impression.

But all the same—Shichika felt something.

He had a feeling.

The Maniwa must have had their reasons for doing things.

Togame always made it sound like they were undeserving of sympathy.

And yet Shichika Yasuri, as the present master of a school marooned⁷ by history—a school which for a time had fallen into obscurity.

Could not stifle his sympathy.

Not like any of the Twelve Bosses had asked him for any.

Komori Maniwa. Kawauso Maniwa. Kyoken Maniwa.

Mitsubachi Maniwa. Chocho Maniwa. Kamakiri Maniwa.

Pengin Maniwa. Kuizame Maniwa. Umigame Maniwa.

Oshidori Maniwa. Shirasagi Maniwa. Hohoh Maniwa—

The Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

The Maniwa Ninja—a band of expert assassins.

“We’ve got company. Over there, Shichika.”

In the village square.

Leaning against the trunk of a girthy, sprawling camphor tree⁸ that stood like the main pillar⁹ of the village—there was a man.

Wearing the telltale sleeveless ninja garb.

Chains wrapped around his body.

A man whom they had not encountered in perhaps half a year.

The man—was Hohoh Maniwa.

“...”

Unlike the last time they had met, his left hand held a drawn katana.

The blade was black.

Blacker than the deepest night.

The longsword lacked a handguard.

It had a pronounced curve—and Hohoh wagged it idly, biding his time.

It would seem as if he had not noticed they were there.

“Whew,” breathed Shichika, after looking over Hohoh. “That was close—for a second I almost thought that black sword was Dokuto the Basilisk. But no sword made by Kiki Shikizaki would ever have a shape as nice as that. I guess he must have stashed the Basilisk somewhere.”

“It would seem so,” Togame seconded Shichika’s observation. “The black blade matches the description of the Basilisk that Penguin gave us, but I dare say that must be a coincidence. Or maybe Penguin was confused or something. No blade of Kiki Shikizaki would ever have a shape as regular as that.”

“Totally. Exactly. I figured the Basilisk was some kind of a liquid¹⁰ sword, like maybe pure venom or something. I dunno.”

“Interesting. Not a bad hypothesis. Sounds plausible enough to me.”

“Helloooo. I can hear you!”

Then.

Suddenly—Hohoh turned their way.

Raising the black blade high and resting it upon his shoulder.

After a chuckle, he continued.

“Seems like you two are having fun—trash-talking my beloved¹¹ swords. Figures. No matter how the times may change, youngsters like you will always sound the same.”

“Huh?”

Shichika was bewildered by the aggression of his speech.

Hohoh spoke pretty steadily for a person who had gone berserk, but something about him made him sound unlike the Hohoh they had met twice before. Compared to the personality he had stolen from Emonzaemon—

This person was beyond different.

This man—was someone else entirely.

Not only with regards to speech, but in his bearing and his facial expressions—faced with¹² Hohoh Maniwa, Shichika was certain he was not the Hohoh Maniwa they knew.

This was not like in the old days on Haphazard Island.

Back when he was unable to tell people apart.

At this point, Shichika could easily tell one person from the next, as long as he wasn't dealing with a set of twins.

And yet—

“Hey, you!” Togame must have felt the same way. “Are you really—Hohoh Maniwa?”

“Me? Nope.”

Hohoh Maniwa.

Asked if he was Hohoh—shook his head, as if the answer should be obvious.

“The name is Kiki Shikizaki.”

“What?!”





Under normal circumstances, Shichika would have interpreted this outburst from Hohoh as nonsense and blamed the wacky self-introduction on the ninja having gone berserk.

But he was in the know.

Shichika knew about—the Foaming Mouth.

The ninpo used by Kyoken Maniwa—one of the five bosses of the Maniwa whom Shichika had personally encountered.

This move allowed her to take over other people's bodies.

Though to be honest, Shichika wasn't sure if it was fair to call it a move.

And while it may have been the stuff of myth, they say the woman known as Kyoken Maniwa had been dead hundreds of years—surviving only as a disembodied will.

This will, going by the name of Kyoken Maniwa, used a form of ninpo called the Foaming Mouth to take over thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of bodies—allowing her to live for hundreds of years, up to the present day.

He knew about the woman and her ninpo.

Which meant he knew—a person's will could persist long after she died.

Same goes for the will of legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki.

Becoming venom and persisting through his swords was not the craziest idea—far from crazy, it made perfect sense.

It would be crazy for that not to be the case.

What was the venom of the Mutant Blades, if not the will of Kiki Shikizaki?

The spirit of the swordsmith, poured into his creations?

In which case—

The despotically toxic venom emanated by Dokuto the Basilisk, whose poison was the strongest of the Twelve Possessed, the masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki—

Could by rights be called Kiki Shikizaki, *the man himself*.

Moreover, Hohoh Maniwa had touched Dokuto the Basilisk with his left arm—the left arm of Kawauso Maniwa!

Making this—a culmination¹³ of the Foaming Mouth and the Infovac!

Sure he had gone berserk—but berserk was not the half of it.

Every aspect of Hohoh Maniwa—down to the last crevice of his body, *had been taken over* by Kiki Shikizaki!

“T-Togame!”

“Whatever it is you’ve realized, you can be sure I do too. Right now I’m busy thinking about what we should do next. Quiet for a second.”

As if the very circumstances steeled her nerves, Togame the Schemer spoke calmly—taking one step forward, as if to confront Hohoh Maniwa, or rather Kiki Shikizaki.

“It is my distinct honor to make your acquaintance—will that do,¹⁴ Kiki Shikizaki?”

“You can skip the stiff formalities. I hate that stuff,” Hohoh Maniwa—or Kiki Shikizaki, dismissed her searching greeting. “I see you in *his memory*. So you’re the Schemer, huh? I see you have a rather stylish¹⁵ way of doing battle... I like that. In an enemy.”

“In his...memory?”

“Yeah. Except there’s something different about how you look inside his head—did you cut your hair? What a shame. You were much prettier with long hair. Now you look like a child.”

“I suppose this is our first time seeing Hohoh since I cut my hair.”

Pengin had been caught off guard as well.

Shichika personally felt that Princess Negative had overreacted, but it showed how strictly folks identified Togame with her lengthy tresses.

He was not surprised that Kiki Shikizaki could tap into Hohoh’s memory.

Kyoken Maniwa had been able to do the same.

In fact, this helped explain things.

Shichika was unable to fully grasp what led Hohoh to head straight for Iga after he had gone berserk—though most likely Kiki Shikizaki, having taken over the body and the memory of Hohoh, had selected Maniwa Village simply for being a place full of people on whom he could “test out his sword.”

—Testing his sword.

Rotting bodies strewn about the village.

They could only have been killed by Kiki Shikizaki—in the form of Hohoh Maniwa.

What filled the hearts of all the villagers when he tore through their home defies the imagination.¹⁶

Watching the head of the community mowing down its people, killing both young and old and men and women alike—

“Do you remember Higaki?”

Togame left this open-ended, just in case.

Rinne Higaki.

Hermit Magus, and only owner of one of the Twelve Possessed who had received the sword from Kiki Shikizaki, the man himself—

“What? You mean Rinne Higaki? Yeah—I wonder how that guy is doing. Haven’t heard that name in forever. Wonder how he’s making out. Couldn’t have been easy dealing with Seito the Garland.”

“It was buried, deep in the ground.”

Togame likely opted to respond this way because she had derived¹⁷ a sense of truth from what Kiki Shikizaki said. Though she had been the one to speak the name Higaki, she had not given a first name, nor betrayed the slightest hint that Higaki had been the owner of Seito the Garland.

Though this was all still hard to swallow—

They had no choice but to accept that Hohoh Maniwa, as he appeared before them, was in fact Kiki Shikizaki.

“The Divine Phoenix, the bird that cannot die. Rather comical for a swordsmith who has been dead for ages to use the body of Hohoh to come back to life. But regardless,” said Togame, “I think this is the end—at least for Hohoh Maniwa.”

Using her Foaming Mouth, Kyoken Maniwa had taken over the body of Konayuki Itezora—but by slamming her with his Fatal Orchid Hika Rakuyo, Shichika had successfully expelled¹⁸ her will.

However—they could not expect the same move to work under these conditions.

Now that Hohoh's body, by way of Kawauso's arm, had garnered¹⁹ the venom of Dokuto the Basilisk.

Sending it coursing through the body of Hohoh Maniwa—head to toe.

"You see, the chief characteristic of Dokuto the Basilisk is a little thing called Venom Despotism.²⁰ You want comedy? This whole thing is a comedy," said Kiki Shikizaki. "This guy here's been cobbling together body parts using his Life Line, stealing from these people's lives. His body and his skills—even his personality, they're all accessories.²¹ Stolen accessories, at that. The man is just one layer after another of *gilding*.²² How fitting to be taken over, in the end, by someone like me?"

"As they say, what goes around comes around."²³ Togame nodded cautiously. "Well? Tell me, Shikizaki—what exactly was your intention, luring us all the way out here?"

"You saying I invited you?"

"Quit playing dumb. Did you not enlist Penguin Maniwa as your messenger?"

"Ah, that I did."

"How exactly do you explain that—how did you know that we would take that road in the first place? Seems to me that was a fairly unreliable way of relaying a message."²⁴

"One question at a time, Schemer," Kiki Shikizaki said with a grim laugh. "In answer to your second question—I was able to predict that you would take that road."

"Predict?"

"Predict, or rather prognosticate,"²⁵ Kiki Shikizaki explained. "I'll have you

know I'm a clairvoyant."²⁶

"Excuse me?"

Togame was stymied by this unhelpful remark. For his part, Shichika had no idea what a clairvoyant even was.

"Sorry, Kiki Shikizaki...what did you just say?" the Schemer pressed.

"Huh? Did you miss that? I said I'm a clairvoyant. CLAIRVOY-ANT—I had a hunch that in due time, the two of you, the Schemer and the Kyotoryu, would take that road."

"So you're some kind of...fortuneteller?"

"Sure. I did a bit of that back in the day. The Shikizakis have been in the soothsaying²⁷ trade for ages—although at this point, it seems as if my roots are shrouded in mystery."

Shikizaki had himself a belly laugh.

Togame was not in the most positive of moods. "This clairvoyant business doesn't help your cause. I'd be more likely to believe you if you said it was a random guess."

"Maybe so. But think it over, Schemer," Kiki Shikizaki said, totally unperturbed. "*How else* can you explain, in concrete terms, how I could craft the Mutant Blades?"

"...Oh!"

"Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say no other explanation would add up."

Togame groaned—how had she failed to see this before Kiki Shikizaki spelled it out?

Now everything made sense to her.

Not so for Shichika, however, who remained in the dark.

Instinctually he grabbed Togame's shoulder.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"Basically..." Making a face like she was fending off a headache, Togame answered Shichika—without turning around, eyes fixed on Kiki Shikizaki. "He means the Twelve Possessed—were manufactured using *methods of the future*."

Zetto the Leveler. Zanto the Razor.

Sento the Legion. Hakuto the Whisper.

Zokuto the Armor. Soto the Twin.

Akuto the Eel. Bito the Sundial.

Oto the Cured. Seito the Garland.

Dokuto the Basilisk. Ento the Bead.

"Whoa—not just the Twelve Possessed. All thousand of the Mutant Blades—were manufactured using methods reimported²⁸ from the future, which I divined."

"From the future? Reimported?"

"Get it?" Togame said, out of patience. "That's why to us, living in the *present day*—they seem to possess characteristics that defy the laws of physics."

So hard that it could never bend or break. Sharp enough to cut through anything.

Complete and utter uniformity. Tuned to be as light and frail as possible.

Ironclad and matchless armor class. The heaviest matter in existence.

The power to revivify the body. A robot almost perpetually²⁹ in motion.

Precise alignment³⁰ of the spirit. An ability to gauge sincerity.

Impregnated with ferocious venom.

Each and every one—had characteristics unimaginable in a regular sword.

But their unimaginable nature was strictly limited to the present age.

Who was to say they would not become regular in the years ahead—hence!

Nothing stops you in the present, if it can be done in the future!

Reimportation!

“Still, there’s a limit. When I was set up by Lake Fuyo, I was able to scrounge up³¹ basically anything I needed, but sometimes the parts or tools you need are nowhere to be found—you can’t get anywhere without the raw materials.”

“...”

“Ah, I’ll never forget my experience making Zanto the Razor. Boy, that was tough. We’re talking about a katana that can cut through anything—which means it shears through the molecular structure of objects. Folks won’t be doing that for what, like four hundred years?”

“Hmph...”

In a show of bravado, Togame crossed her arms and puffed up her chest.

“What can I say—this comes as a surprise, but it’s not out of the question. Indeed, no other explanation would suffice. It’s not like you can actually defy the laws of physics.”

“Correct. I’m telling you, the Mutant Blades are *mere* katanas, conforming with both physics and psychology.”

Saying this—Shikizaki lifted the black blade from his shoulder and cast a mild arc.

As if cutting through the air before him.

Letting the blade fall—without a sound.

“Making this thing something—of a *period piece*.”³²

“Regardless of whether or not any of this is true, it makes no difference to us now. I could care less whether it’s a relic of the past or a gift from the future. But in any case, Shikizaki, I need you to clarify something about your story that has left me rather confused.”

“One question at a time.”

“I will abide,” Togame said. “Why was it—you made these katanas?”

“...”

“I don’t understand what drove you to create katanas using methods from the future. It would be one thing if you were a swordsmith by birth—but did you not say you come from a long line of fortunetellers?”

“I did indeed.”

“In the fortunetelling business, is there not a tacit understanding that the secrets of the future are to be divulged as sparingly as possible? Reckless mention of future events can potentially rewrite history—I was under the impression you could hint³³ at the future, but nothing more. And yet you have bestrewn the Mutant Blades all over Japan.”

“Regrettably,” Kiki Shikizaki said, in answer to Togame’s question, unperturbed as ever, “my goal, from the first, was to rewrite history.”

“Rewrite—history?”

“Though perhaps *revise*³⁴ would be a better way of putting it.”

Kiki Shikizaki lifted his back from the trunk of the camphor tree.

Then turned himself to squarely face the Schemer.

“Listen. Me and my kin have been in the soothsaying trade for countless generations—the Shikizakis were in the game long before this country reorganized itself as a nation. Way back when, legend has it we weren’t soothsayers, so much as what you might call shamans³⁵—but the wheels have been in motion since the first Shikizaki. Forget your tacit understanding—little by little, slowly but surely, *my kin* has revised the history of this country. *Changing the very future we foresaw,*” intoned Kiki Shikizaki. “Until I came along—and revised things entirely.”

“But why!”

“Because of the Age of Warring States! That most balkanized³⁶ of eras presented the single greatest opportunity to manipulate the course of history of this land—and as luck would have it, the Head of the House of Shikizaki at the time, none other than yours truly, happened to be the greatest fortuneteller in the Shikizaki lineage. *Though not by accident*—hence why my ancestors fiddled with history.”

“So that you, the greatest fortuneteller in the Shikizaki lineage—would be born at that exact moment in time? How is that possible?”

“Once you know what lies ahead, just about anything is possible,” Shikizaki laughed, nodding at Togame. “As it turned out, the most effective way of manipulating history in the Age of Warring States was to fabricate katanas. Which is why—I bet my life on fabricating swords.”

The legendary swordsmith.

Kiki Shikizaki—thus came into being.

And he sounded pretty pleased with himself.³⁷

“My thoughts were occupied by nothing but making katanas—not like I didn’t have a little romance now and then. I’ve been known to shirk responsibility with the best of them.”

“I appreciate that personal insight,³⁸ but you have yet to answer my question. I inquired as to what would make you want to try and revise history.”

“Not try. I did, in fact, revise it,” Shikizaki Kiki corrected Togame’s choice of words. “The world as you know it should never have turned out this way—the Itezora Clan? Come on. The Maniwa? None of their kind could possibly have existed in the normal course of history. Perhaps not even you—Togame the Schemer.”

“My father...” Togame said in a low voice. “My father gave his life—to right the history you revised.”

“Huh?” Kiki Shikizaki was bug-eyed, as if stunned. “You’re kidding—do you mean to tell me that somebody outside of the Shikizaki lineage³⁹ caught wind of it? Here I thought that shogun was the only guy who noticed. That’s incredible—I know that I’m the one who did it, but hey, we’re talking about changing history here. Leave it to the owner of the Diamond to have a guy like that for a father.”

“Hey.”

Silent all this time.

Shichika Yasuri finally interrupted their conversation.

“You said the Itezora Clan and the Maniwa, and even Togame, could not

possibly exist in normal history...but what about the Kyotoryu?"

"Hmm? Ah, yes, the Kyotoryu."

It made Kiki Shikizaki smile, almost cheerfully, to hear Shichika ask this question.

"You're a different story—*since you, my boy, are among the katanas I created.*"

"..."

"Didn't you meet with Higaki? If so, he must have told you—the Kyotoryu is the last sword I ever made, my magnum opus, which I dubbed Kyoto the Diamond."

The magnum opus.

For which the masterworks—were only prototypes.

"The first of you, Kazune Yasuri, was not what I would call the greatest⁴⁰—though his foundational efforts were hardly in vain. They resulted in the successful generation⁴¹—of swords like you, Shichika Yasuri."

"You know about our founder?"

"Know him? We were best friends," claimed Kiki Shikizaki. "He may have been a dumbass swordsman, who could care less about history—but thanks to him, my Mutant Blades realized their ultimate potential. For that, I can't thank him enough."

"..."

"Quit staring, Kyotoryu—after all, I'm basically your father."

"I only got one father—my old man," Shichika insisted.

Mutsue Yasuri—Hero of the Rebellion.

The teacher who trained Shichika for nineteen years.

And the first person Shichika had killed—in his whole life.

“You’re nobody to me.”

“Such a cold-hearted⁴² thing to say. But that’s all well and good. No one has any obligation to concern themselves with where they come from—you’re who you are, and that is that, no matter who your father or your mother was.”

“You talk big, for a dead man.”

Togame made no attempt to mask her distaste for the wiseacre⁴³ rants of Kiki Shikizaki.

“If you’re unwilling to answer my question about what motivated you, I will not ask again. It makes no difference to us anyway—now then. For almost a year, we’ve hunted down the swords that you supposedly made using methods from the future, working our way up and down⁴⁴ the full breadth of Japan, and seeing everything under the sun along the way, or so we thought—but in retrospect, the idea that we would end up meeting you, their maker, is absurdly sensible, one might even say predictable.⁴⁵ If we can meet a hermit magus, then surely we can meet a ghost. Who cares. I probably won’t even include you in the report I submit to my superiors—”

“Too cruel. Wouldn’t that mean revising history?” Kiki Shikizaki seemed to find Togame’s moodiness amusing. “Hey, I’m not against⁴⁶ telling you what motivated me. It’s just kind of a long story—I bet my descendants could do a better job explaining things for you.”

“You have descendants?”

“Sure. They must’ve lost most of their clairvoyance, after I retired from the fortunetelling business—but I have a feeling someone’s out there somewhere. Though who knows if they’re using the name Shikizaki.”

“First you say you know the future. And now you’re telling me you don’t know the first thing about your own descendants?”

“You’re confused. Don’t you know that fortunetellers can’t read their own fortunes?”

“...”

“I highly doubt the family petered out, so have a look around—any descendant of mine is bound to be out there making moves, continuing the mission of revising history.”

“The mission—of revising history.”

“Right. You want a motive? There’s your motive.”

On that note, Kiki Shikizaki nodded solemnly.

He did not seem to be talking nonsense—what good would talking nonsense do him anyhow?

“Not like this comes anywhere close to your yearlong journey, but I’ve seen all kinds of things traveling here from Dewa, along the Tokaido Highway—for the most part, the country’s history turned out exactly as I thought it would. Allowing for a slight margin of error.”

“Why not foresee it, without having to see it for yourself?”

“No need to pick fights, Schemer—prognostication is no substitute for firsthand knowledge. You need to actually come face-to-face with people and hear what they have to say.”

“Face-to-face?”

“Indeed. At this point it feels a little late, Schemer, but I may as well answer your initial question now—I’ll have you know, I called you out here because I wanted to meet both of you in person. My magnum opus, Kyoto the Diamond—and his owner.”

With that—Kiki Shikizaki.

Brought his left hand to meet his right hand, so that both now held Dokuto the Basilisk—and took position.

His stance—was unlike anything that Shichika had ever seen.

Sinking low, he raised the sword up high so that its tip pointed toward them, and twisted his hips.

“See this? This form was devised by a genius swordsman to be born about a hundred and fifty years from now. I gather Hakuhei Sabi has been hailed the greatest swordsman of this era, but this guy is even better than Sabi. The darling of his age—though in the normal course of history, that age will be the last era of swordsmen. Trust me, the Triple-Decker Thrust⁴⁷ that this bizarre form sets me up for is impossible to dodge.”

“A method—from the future?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Alright, Kyotoryu—I think I’ve coddled you enough.⁴⁸ Does that give you a basic understanding? No, it looks as though you’ve failed to understand, but your owner here, the Schemer, understood the bulk of it, so if you have any further questions, ask her later. For now—come and get it. Aren’t you planning to capture this masterwork of mine, Dokuto the Basilisk?”

“Togame.”

Prodded thus by Kiki Shikizaki—Shichika declined to answer, wanting to check first with his master—his owner, Togame the Schemer.

“What should I do in this case?”

“Why ask me such a thing...when you and I are only here to do one thing?” Togame said. “I don’t care if he’s Hohoh Maniwa or Kiki Shikizaki—fight him and take the sword. The negotiations were a bust. You are my bodyguard, Shichika Yasuri. Fight and win.”

“Understood.”

No matter—who his foe may be.

Once he had orders, he could act.

Togame sank back, while Shichika stepped ahead, taking her place—lumbering forward, until he was just barely out of range of the strange stance Kiki Shikizaki had taken.

Then Shichika, in turn, took his position.

Opting for Form Six—the Hozuki.⁴⁹

Bracing his neck, he placed the blades of his hands on both sides of his head, to use their power for defense rather than offense, then jutted out his elbows in a symmetrical fashion and stood up on his tiptoes—affording himself incredible mobility.

If Form Seven, the Kakitsubata, was designed to give him total freedom to move back and forth, the Hozuki gave him total freedom to move left and right.

This choice was based on the observation that Kiki Shikizaki’s form centered on⁵⁰ the thrust.

“I’ll say this going in, Kyotoryu,” said Kiki Shikizaki, keeping form. “I have

already foreseen myself losing to you—but it remains to be seen exactly how I'll be defeated. That's prognostication for you. But know this: foreseeing a loss and losing are two different things entirely."

"..."

"Visions of the future blur all too easily—otherwise, my family would never have felt the need to reshape history. And because I am a swordsmith, not a swordsman, I can ply the methods of the future all I want but never have a decent chance of beating you—though there is always the off chance. Don't even think of going easy on me. Give me your blade, in all its sharpness."

"Sharpness?"

"I want to use this body to test how masterfully—or rather, perfectly⁵¹ sharp Kyoto the Diamond is. Hence why I've been waiting here, to test my sword out. So now—you test it out, on me."

Test out.

Cut down three hundred men—before you call yourself a novice.

At what point did you become a model of a man?

"Go ahead. Test your blade on my body."

"It's not your body, though."

"Yet it possesses my history," spake Kiki Shikizaki. "I get the sense—*some part of you has already been broken*,⁵² and handsomely at that—but that's no reason for you to go easy on me. You only become a model of a man when you surpass your father. Let's have it," Kiki Shikizaki said, twisting towards Shichika. "Show me what you've got."

"Don't worry, I'll show you—but too bad you'll be torn to smithereens!"

Man, how long had it been?

The catchphrase Togame the Schemer assigned to Shichika Yasuri—made its first proper appearance in ages.

“May the best sword win—fight!”

Behind him.

Cried the voice of Togame the Schemer.

Though Shichika had never seen or fought someone who used a stance like this, he recognized that Kiki Shikizaki was taking a passive, patient, idle approach⁵³—if someone was going to make a move, it would have to be Shichika.

Shichika shot to the right—then flew back to the left.

Bouncing from side to side so fast he left an afterimage.⁵⁴

Picking up speed, Shichika edged his way within range of Kiki Shikizaki.

Whereupon.

As to be expected—Kiki Shikizaki thrust Dokuto the Basilisk.

His triplet⁵⁵—Triple-Decker Thrust.

Except by then, Shichika was up in Kiki Shikizaki’s grill—too close for the attack to be effective. Not close quarters—the closest quarters possible.⁵⁶

Indeed, facing off at such minimal distance, their bodies all but touched. This went beyond close quarters; the two were nearly rubbing noses.⁵⁷

But even in these circumstances, Shichika’s form gave him total mobility.

Fighting not with the hands and feet, but with the elbows and the knees.

Kyotoryu Form Six—the Hozuki!

“Kyotoryu—Noichigo!”

Dodging the entirety of the Triple-Decker Thrust, he parried with his elbow, scooping up the handle of the blade—

Dokuto the Basilisk broke free from Kiki Shikizaki’s grip and danced through the air.

Shichika was not so happy-go-lucky as to simply watch, amidst the heat of battle, as Dokuto the Basilisk pirouetted through the sky and lost to gravity, falling to the earth.

Immediately after the Noichigo, he transitioned to his next form.

Form Four—the Asagao.

Bent deep at the knees, to lower his enormous body—both feet faced to the side. Twisting his torso so extremely that he nearly turned his back on Kiki Shikizaki.

Left hand clenched tightly in a fist—and covered with the right.

Among the Seven Forms of the Kyotoryu, the sole stance in which he made a fist—Kyotoryu Form Four, the Asagao.

Then.

Normally, the form was followed up by Fatal Orchid Four: Ryuryoku Kako—but not exclusively.

In his battle against that other scion of the Kyotoryu, the genius Nanami Yasuri, he had worked out the ultimate expression of the Kyotoryu—showcasing its teachings to perfection!

Unleashing his seven moves at once, in the fastest sequence possible, for a

maelstrom of Fatal Orchids!

“The Last Fatal Orchid of the Kyotoryu–Shichika Hachiretsu Redux!”

Fatal Orchid Four: Ryuryoku Kako

Fatal Orchid One: Kyoka Suigetsu

Fatal Orchid Five: Hika Rakuyo

Fatal Orchid Seven: Rakka Rozeki

Fatal Orchid Three: Hyakka Ryoran

Fatal Orchid Six: Kinjo Tenka

Fatal Orchid Two: Kacho Fugetsu

Suffering every single blow and every single slice with the full breadth of his body, his spirit, and his soul, a helpless Kiki Shikizaki was blown away—but smiling with satisfaction.

To be sure.

This was the smile of a craftsman satisfied with his work.

¹ 霜月 SHIMOTSUKI “month of frost” eleventh month of the Japanese lunar calendar ² 腐臭 FUSHŪ “smell of decomposition”

³ 死体 SHITAI “dead bodies”

⁴ 腐乱 FURAN “rotting wild” vs. 乱心 RANSHIN go nuts, berserk ⁵ 専売特許 SENBAI TOKKYO “exclusive right” (to purvey) ⁶ 皆殺し MINA GOROSHI “kill everyone” the same word described massacre of Togame’s kin ⁷ 取り残された TORINOKOSARETA left behind ⁸ 大楠の木 ŌKUSU NO KI aromatic

evergreen, often occupies place of prominence at Shinto shrines ⁹ 大黒柱
DAIKOKU BASHIRA chief support (literal or symbolic) ¹⁰ 液状 EKIJŌ “liquid
state” vs. solid or gas ¹¹ 愛らしい AIRASHII adorable, lovable ¹² 目前の
MOKUZEN NO “before one’s eyes”

¹³ 同時現象 DŌJI GENSHŌ “simultaneous phenomena”

¹⁴ と言えいいのかな TO IEBA IINO KANA is that what I should say ¹⁵ 味の
ある AJI NO ARU “flavorful”

¹⁶ 想像を絶する SŌZŌ WO ZESSURU “beyond (the wildest reaches of the)
imagination”

¹⁷ 汲み取った KUMITOTTA drew out (water; meaning) ¹⁸ 追い出す
OIDASU chase out

¹⁹ 読み調べられた YOMI SHIRABE RARETA gleaned the workings, as in
Kawauso’s skill Infovac ²⁰ 猛毒刀与 MŌDOKU TŌYO “dispensation of the
highly toxic sword” pun on 投与 TŌYO administer (a drug) ²¹ 仮初め
KARISOME temporary; in this case, things which have been tacked on ²²
めっき MEKKI metal plating as in 毒刀 鍍 DOKUTŌ MEKKI Dokuto the
Basilisk ²³ 自業自得 JIGŌ JITOKU reap what you sow ²⁴ 伝言 “sending
word” vs. 伝説 DENSETSU legend (as in “legendary swordsmith”) ²⁵ 予測
予知 YOSOKU YOCHI “measure beforehand” “know beforehand”

²⁶ 予知能力者 YOCHI NŌRYOKU SHA person claiming knowledge of the
future ²⁷ 占術師 SENJUTSUSHI fancy word for fortuneteller homophonous
with 仙術 SENJUTSU hermit magic ²⁸ 逆輸入 GYAKU YUNYŪ “reverse
import”

²⁹ 半永久的 HAN’EIKYŪ TEKI “half everlasting”

³⁰ 矯正 KYŌSEI correct (an imbalance or flaw) ³¹ 手に入る TE NI HAIRU come into hand ³² 時代物 JIDAIMONO relic of the past; work of art portraying a bygone era ³³ 暗示 ANJI “show darkly”

³⁴ 改変 改竄 KAIHEN KAIZAN alter falsify *e.g.* 歴史改竄 REKISHI KAIZAN revision of history; whitewashing or denying (past) events ³⁵ 祈禱師 KITŌSHI “master of invocations”

³⁶ 群雄割拠 GUNYŪ KAKKYO divided into rival territories ³⁷ 見得を切る MIE WO KIRU strike a pose (as in kabuki), or figuratively, preen ³⁸ 意見 IKEN “willful view” opinion ³⁹ 家系 KAKEI “house strain”

⁴⁰ 完了 KANRYŌ perfected as in 完了形変体刀 KANRYŌKEI HENTAITŌ magnum opus ⁴¹ 生み出す UMIDASU beget; create

⁴² 薄情 HAKUJŌ skimpy on the sympathy ⁴³ 知った風な SHITTA FŪNA know-it-all

⁴⁴ 津々浦々 TSUTSU URA URA coast to coast ⁴⁵ 平凡 HEIBON commonplace harsh criticism for the greatest fortuneteller ever ⁴⁶ やぶさかじゃねえ YABUSAKA JA'NEH not mind ⁴⁷ 三段突き SANDAN TSUKI three-stage lunge vs. 三段跳び SANDAN TOBI triple jump ⁴⁸ 親切な解説編 SHINSETSU NA KAISETSUHEN kind explanatory portion (of the tale) ⁴⁹ 鬼灯 HŌZUKI “The Winter Cherry”

⁵⁰ 特化した TOKKA SHITA specialized in ⁵¹ 完成度 完了度 KANSEIDO KANRYŌDO corresponds with “the masterworks”/“magnum opus”

⁵² 折れている ORETE IRU bent; snapped compromised, capitulated ⁵³ 受けの構え 待ちの構え 静の構え UKE NO KAMAE MACHI NO KAMAE SEI NO KAMAE receptive stance, waiting stance, quiet stance ⁵⁴ 残像 ZANZŌ

“persistent impression”

⁵⁵ 三連続 SANRENZOKU sequence of three ⁵⁶ 接近戦 超接近戦
SEKKINSEN CHŌ SEKKINSEN close-range battle super close-range battle ⁵⁷
接触戦 SESSHOKUSEN “contact battle”



EPILOGUE



Zetto the Leveler—check.
Zanto the Razor—check.
Sento the Legion—check.
Hakuto the Whisper—check.
Zokuto the Armor—check.
Soto the Twin—check.
Akuto the Eel—check.
Bito the Sundial—check.
Oto the Cured—check.
Seito the Garland—check.
Dokuto the Basilisk—check.
Among the Twelve Possessed.
But one remained—Ento the Bead.



As we began discussing along the road to Iga, however intense the venom of Dokuto the Basilisk may have been, it only transfused Hohoh Maniwa's body to the extent it did, allowing Kiki Shikizaki to air his personality, because his left arm originally belonged to Kawauso Maniwa—which is why Togame the Schemer and Shichika Yasuri were not at risk of the same thing happening if they carried the Basilisk unsheathed, although they were not about to take any chances.

Only after lashing the handguard tightly to the scabbard did Togame lift the sword, not by the handle but by the scabbard, and gingerly rest it on her shoulder.

The katana was rather heavy, on account of its length, but she deemed it was too risky to entrust it to a bumbling bumpkin¹ like Shichika.

Her free hand—held hands with Shichika, who walked beside her.

Demonstrating—his status as her confidant.

“I know we've always shipped the captured swords back to Owari—but since this is essentially our final conquest, doing so would be out of the question,” explained Togame. “We would be handing Princess Negative an opportunity to snatch up all the credit for herself.”

All told—they had spent less than fifteen minutes in Iga, jaunting through New Maniwa.

Which was the most they could have handled.

To spend multiple hours immersed in such fetor would have been too much

even for Togame the Schemer or the Master of the Kyotoryu. Witnessing Kiki Shikizaki breathe his last, they took their leave, without tarrying another moment.

Barely time—

To take a moment of silence² for the late Hohoh Maniwa.

“What the heck happened back there?”

Shichika had yet to comprehend the situation.

Hohoh Maniwa going berserk.

The advent³ of Kiki Shikizaki.

The true story of the Mutant Blades.

All of this went way over Shichika’s head.

Which is why—once they had crossed the border and left Iga behind, he asked Togame.

“I don’t understand a single bit of it.”

“Well, I think Hohoh Maniwa simply went berserk and lost his mind. When that happens, it’s common for people to be convinced they’ve been reborn as someone else.”

“How many Maniwa are left?” asked Shichika. “Is that guy—Penguin Maniwa the last of them?”

“Penguin Maniwa...” Togame muttered, as if talking to herself. “More use to us alive.”

“Huh?”

“Look—that Emonzaemon Soda is as stubborn as they come. Uncompromising,

if you will. Once he has taken aim, his quarry will not get away.”

“Okay—so I guess he’s probably...”

“I’m saying there is nothing we can do. In the eyes of the bakufu, the Maniwa are traitors, pure and simple. Regardless of his ulterior motives, I cannot intervene, so long as Emonzaemon is acting in his capacity as an agent of the Inspector General.”

“You make it sound as if you don’t want Penguin killed.”

“I suppose that’s true. That boy could be quite useful. I’d like to cash in on the favor that he owes us.”

Togame shrugged, acting dodgy.⁴

“The Maniwa are undeserving of our sympathy, like I’ve been saying all along—not to sound like Kiki Shikizaki, but after coming face-to-face with the wretched state of their village, I’d be lying if I said that I feel nothing.”

“Face-to-face.”

“Not just the Maniwa.”

Togame gazed off into the distance—as if stricken with emotion.

“Over the past year, you and I have journeyed all over Japan. I’m just a shot away⁵ from being able to draw a map of the whole country—we have been all kinds of places, and seen all kinds of people. This is the longest trip I’ve ever made—and it taught me just how shallow my world view really was. *To think I had the gall to take you for an island monkey.* I knew absolutely nothing,” she insisted. “And honestly—there’s so much left for me to learn.”

“This is getting pretty sentimental. You don’t sound like yourself. Maybe you’ve changed too, but aren’t you taking things a bit too far?” Caught

unawares by Togame's disposition, Shichika made no effort to hide his bafflement. "I guess if Princess Negative has Ento the Bead, that means your work is pretty close to done—but what about the mysteries of the Mutant Blades, the masterworks and the magnum opus?"

"It's not my job to solve them," answered Togame, smiling wryly. "My father devoted himself⁶ to correcting the history distorted⁷ by Kiki Shikizaki and his kin—but unfortunately, I lack the spirit to carry out his will."

"Yeah, didn't you mention that last month?"

Her link to Kiki Shikizaki.

When she faced Rinne Higaki, and thereby faced her failings—Togame the Schemer confronted memories that had been sealed off at a young age.

A matter we have already discussed.

This too—Shichika was unable to fully comprehend. "If Seito the Garland was buried underneath the castle, it could have technically belonged to Rinne Higaki, but still, its influence must have been unavoidable for Takahito Hida—was he beholden to it too, as a sorta owner, like maybe the Kuromiko at Triad Shrine?"

"I believe he sought its influence of his own accord. In which case—the fact that my father faced off with your father in his final moments is pretty curious indeed. However," said Togame, "there will be time for such considerations when everything is over."

"When everything is over, huh? I guess you're pretty close to realizing your ambitions. Though if you're set up for a final showdown with the Princess...that probably means I gotta fight Emonzaemon."

"Wrong." Togame shook her head at Shichika. "I'm not sure whether you will

see this as a good thing or a bad thing, but my fight with the Princess is not so literal as that—I see us having a political discussion. It’s all about diplomacy. Acts of violence will help us none.”

“Okay...”

Though not a bad thing.

This definitely sounded like a pain in the butt.

Not Shichika’s cup of tea.

Emonzaemon—was perhaps better suited to this sort of thing than him.

“Oh,” Togame said—spotting something ahead of them. “Speak of the devil, Shichika—that Princess is as hawk-eyed⁸ as ever.”

Would you look at that.

Down the road stretching straight ahead of them—on the road leading to Owari, a man stood tall, awaiting their arrival.

A gentleman in clothes unfit for this time and place.

And on his feet, not straw sandals or geta, but shoes of leather.⁹

He bore a pair of swords, one big, one small—

And wore a mask, on which were scrawled the words “NON-NINJA.”

A man they had not met face-to-face since the eighth moon—Emonzaemon Soda.

When they were close, Emonzaemon said nothing—declining to make the first move.

He was not simply waiting for them.

The lieutenant—was ready for them.

“So he predicted our itinerary and beat us here posthaste—so be it,” declared Togame. “Helps to hurry things along. But since they’ve made the first move, the ball is in our court—okay, Shichika. We now commence our parley.”

“I’m not sure I can help with that—”

“All I want is your emotional support.”¹⁰

“Oh, okay.”

This jogged Shichika’s memory.

Something Kiki Shikizaki told them, while possessing Hohoh Maniwa—they may have lost most of their clairvoyance, but he had a hunch that descendants of the Shikizaki lineage were out there somewhere, even today.

If that was true.

Who were they—and what were they up to?

A silly thing for him to fret about—but he was stuck on it.

Besides—why had these folks been so intent on revising history?

That was still a mystery.

Togame had dismissed it as a reckless act of sadism,¹¹ but unless they found a way to ask the descendants of Kiki Shikizaki, they would never know.

Stuck—on the idea.

Togame was about to commence her parley with Princess Negative, however, and probably had no time to get tied up in “irrelevancies”—

“Hey there, Emonzaemon.”

When they were close enough for him to hear, Togame greeted him, taking the initiative. “Thanks for taking the trouble to meet up with us—as you can see,

we come bearing Dokuto the Basilisk. We also located¹² New Maniwa—though why bother getting into all of that. From the look of things, Emonzaemon, I reckon you have some kind of a message for me?”

“Indeed I do.”

Emonzaemon bowed deeply in response.

Behind the mask, his face—was impossible to read.

Same goes for his feelings.

“I never thought Her Highness would say this—but she sends her congratulations. You are now one step closer to fulfilling your ambition.”

“Ambition? I don’t recall ever harboring such a thing.”

“I see. Perhaps the proper word would be revenge?”

Seeing through Togame’s self-derision, Emonzaemon twisted the knife.¹³

“Daughter of Takahito Hida, once the Kaoyaku of Oshu—Princess Mercy.”

“WHAT!”

“No need.”

Bang.

Bang.

Out of nowhere.

The lumps of metal Emonzaemon had produced from inside of his jacket—sent fire from their muzzles, with hollow clangs.

The bullets soared.

Both rounds—pierced¹⁴ Togame the Schemer’s torso.

Her petite body—doubled over from the impact and flew backwards.

The hand which had been holding Shichika’s—torn away.

“To-Togame!”

Hearing Shichika cry out.

And retrieving Dokuto the Basilisk, which had been fumbled by the Schemer—Emonzaemon Soda spoke in the most heartless tone imaginable.

“Now, Schemer. What manner of last words can I hear from you?”



The next book will conclude this tale.

Dokuto the Basilisk: Check

End of Book Eleven

To Be Continued

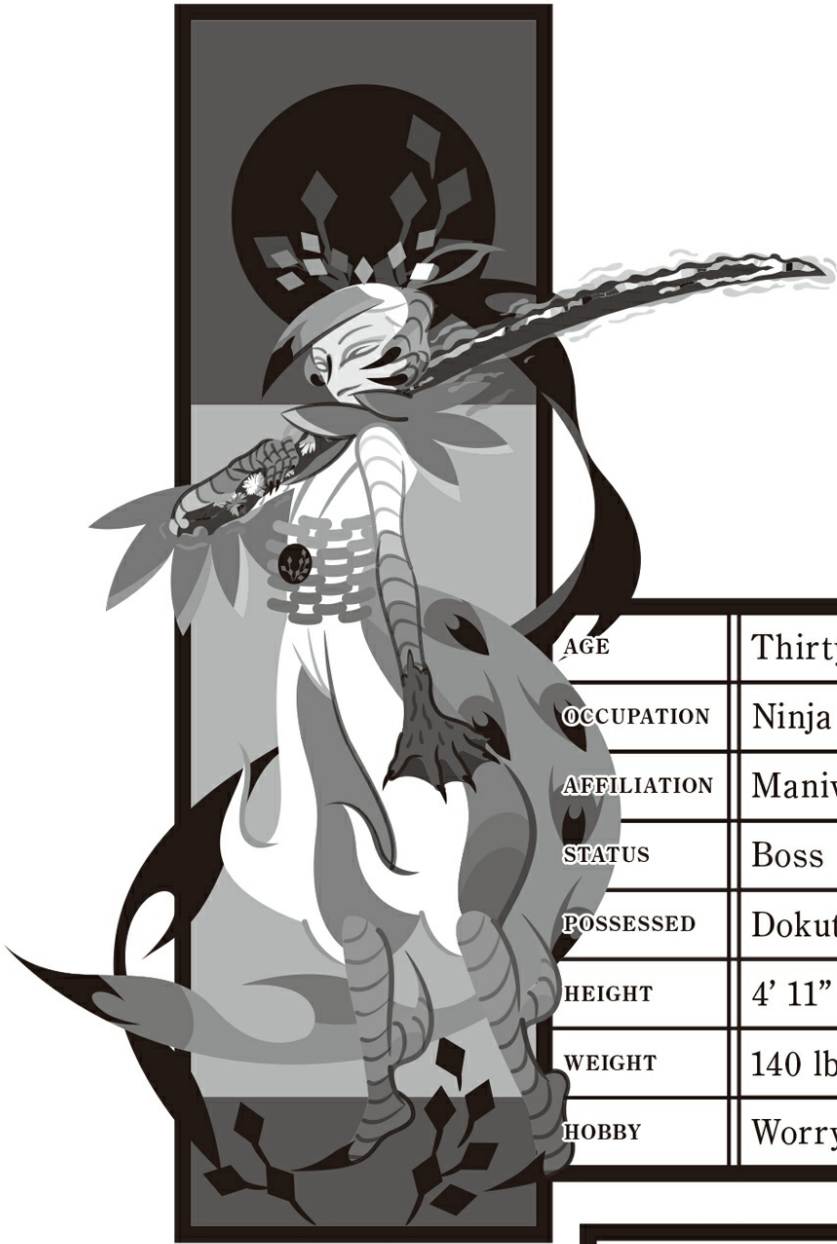
¹ うっかり屋 UKKARIYA absentminded person ² 弔う TOMURAU observe a death, usually in an ad hoc manner ³ 降臨 KŌRIN “descend and near”

⁴ はぐらかす HAGURAKASU avoid a direct answer by changing the subject ⁵ あと一息 ATO HITOIKI “after one more breath”

⁶ 奔走 HONSŌ “run about” make every effort ⁷ 歪曲 WAIKYOKU warp, bend out of shape ⁸ 目敏い MEZATOI quick to notice ⁹ 洋靴 YŌKA “Western footwear” 靴 KUTSU = 化けた BAKETA transformed 革 KAWA leather ¹⁰ 安らぎをくれ YASURAGI WO KURE give reassurance ¹¹ 愉快犯 YUKAIHAN crime committed for fun ¹² 発見 HAKKEN discover ¹³ 斬りこむ KIRIKOMU cut deep, or in ¹⁴ 貫通 KANTSŪ pass through (to the other side)

CHARACTER
INDEX II

HOHOH MANIWA



AGE	Thirty-two
OCCUPATION	Ninja
AFFILIATION	Maniwa Clan
STATUS	Boss
POSSESSED	Dokuto the Basilisk
HEIGHT	4' 11"
WEIGHT	140 lbs.
HOBBY	Worrying Himself

LIST OF
SPECIAL MOVES

DECAPITATION CYCLE	⇐⇒↑⇐⇒↓⇐⇒ THRUST + KICK + SLASH
INFOVAC	SLASH (RAPID FIRE)
VENOM DESPOTISM	⇐ (HOLD) ⇒ KICK + THRUST
TRIPLE-DECKER THRUST	⇐ (HOLD) ⇒ THRUST (RAPID FIRE)

This presents a decent opportunity to explore the somewhat scary question of what it means for somebody to die. Clearly it means their anatomical functions come to a halt, so that they pass away, but there was a time when I was hung up on the question of what exactly “passes away.” It would seem that whatever we call life would be the most accurate answer, but my conclusion at the time was that it wasn’t their life, so much as their *character*. When a person dies, that means their character disappears and goes away. While I admit this might sound like a pretty simplistic conclusion, this thing that I’ve called character is practically impossible to pin down. As the individualistic overtones of the word suggest, we tend to think that everyone has a distinct identity, all their own, while in actuality, our characters are the product of our environment. We have old sayings like “He that touches pith shall be defiled” and “Like attracts like,” but at sum, we are all influenced by our surroundings, and live our lives by influencing others. But is that how it works? This makes it sound like when a person dies, their character disappears, without a trace or leaving any kind of an impression, when it would appear that this is not the case, since it often seems as if their presence leaves a lasting effect on the world around them. Life is passed on, and memories are handed down. Sometimes this means not being influenced directly, but using others as a negative example. You look at those around you and decide to head off in the opposite direction. Which is unquestionably one kind of influence. The idea of a character uninfluenced by anyone and not influencing anybody else is theoretically impossible. With this in mind, lately I’ve been wondering if dying isn’t about passing away, so much as

passing the baton. Though who's to say there isn't someone out there in the world with one of these theoretically impossible characters, uninfluenced by anyone and not influencing anybody else... The world is an incredibly big place.

Here we are, at the end of the eleventh book of *Sword Tale*. The fact that there are now eleven of these books is more perplexing than surprising. Crazy stuff. So many things have yet to be explained. But having made it through eleven books, all that remains is the home stretch to the finish line, and I intend to write my way to the end giving it everything I've got. I know I'm getting ahead of myself, but I'd like to offer my most humble thanks to our illustrator *take*, who has been along for the entire ride. So much for *Book Eleven: Dokuto the Basilisk*.

One book left!

NISIOISIN



BOOK TWELVE

炎
刃
銃

ENTO
THE BEAD

刀鎧

第十二話 炎刀・銃



序章	
一章	—— 別離
二章	—— 家鳴匡綱
三章	—— 城攻
四章	—— 家鳴將軍家御側人十二人衆
五章	—— 鎧七花
終章	

脚本 華園 一竹
原案 及川 幸司
構成 堀江 敦
演出 堀江 敦
制作 野村 信一（凸版印刷）
本文 使用書体：POT-筑紫明朝 Pro L

The original Book Twelve Table of contents spread



PROLOGUE



Now hear this.

Before we begin, I must express how grateful I am to have been the recipient of such good company throughout this scant yet lengthy—or long yet scanty foray into history.

Grateful to whom?

To you.

My futile attempt to slice off, draw up, and otherwise pick out but a single year of a trivial chapter in a certain take on history, and to describe it in the manner now established, was perhaps not such a meaningful pursuit, but the good humor¹ you have shown me all along the way is something that, in my view, has definite value in and of itself.

Value.²

To be honest, I am not such a big fan of the word.

Why? Because value, or any notion recognized as a value system, is the first thing to be turned on its head for convenience's sake—and once turned on its head, it will not be restored.

Exclusive, but easily lost.

And once lost, never regained.

To render such a thing *absolute* is inarguably absurd. At least for me.

So with that in mind, let's talk of something that has no value.

Or at least no value system.

Questions, or perhaps outright criticism, might have arisen to a certain extent regarding the history that I have described this time (this time indeed, though perhaps we're talking about next time).

Criticism, and complaints.

While I do not have it in me to engage with, register, and otherwise answer for every instance thereof, I nevertheless feel a certain need, as we finish off this history, to offer some prefatory remarks.

So first, let me ask you something.

Just as Takahito Hida, sometime Kaoyaku of Oshu, once asked his own daughter—"What do you think history is?"

When I think about the way he must have felt when he asked his own daughter that question, it makes me feel no small amount of guilt—but putting that aside.

You obviously have your own version of history.

Your history.

Your history.

Something altogether different from the history I have described in this project, to the point where you, in perceiving your own version as exclusive, may even see the one I've described as no more than a fabrication³—though as I've underscored throughout, there is no such thing as an exclusive, irreplaceable⁴ history.

Or perhaps once again—history is exclusive, but easily lost.

Sad to say.

Your version of history, yours though it may be—is not yours alone.

Hypothetically.

Not like there's anything hypothetical about it—but in the interest of a logical and ethical argument, let's start off with the hypothetical.

They say—history is merely written.⁵

If you want to learn about events that happened prior to your birth, you must rely on the writings, or documents, left behind by your predecessors. Unless you are an omnipotent divine being, there simply is no other way to learn about the various things that people were responsible for doing in the past.

Failing such resources, we cannot unravel the past.

However, we do not actually have any way of judging the veracity of those writings—in fact, because any piece of writing is the product of an individual, it cannot but turn false.⁶ In the end, leaving a record means minding what other people would think.

A history that minds what other people would think?

Whoever heard of such a foolish thing?

The only point in time that we can label true is now.

Our past is laden with emotion, and our future is viewed with hope.

The only thing we can comprehend that has not faded, that is not colored, is this very instant, meaning the present moment.

Which means you cannot even trust the line before this—the only thing you

can be sure of is each word, in the moment that you read it.

It is not unheard of for the historical treatment of a given person to vary widely from one document to the next—just as the reputation of a given person varies widely with the times.

Really, it's nothing more.

Value, easily turned on its head.

Shifting.

Yes.

History will shift.

It keeps on shifting.

Shifting to no end.

In actuality, this manner of altering history—or revising it for that matter, is far from exceptional.

Everybody does this, without giving it a second thought. To put it in more personal terms, everybody will exaggerate to some extent when talking about their past.

Right?

Not saying this is simple.

Just that revising history is far from exceptional.

Hence.

Since any piece of writing about history, so long as it is written to be read, is doomed to be a lie, I have no intention of asserting that the history I have recorded in this project is impeccable.

Accurate. Factual.

Absolute.

These words are products of our fantasy.⁷

Nobody actually believes them.

Thing is, if all history is a lie, I have no qualms about submitting, as an equivalent, the history that I have described.

An unholy history full of holes.

A history that comes to an end with this installment.

The final curtain will soon be lowered on this tale that started on a desert island off the coast of Kyoto.

Soon enough.

This saga, which developed without necessity, will conclude without necessity.

Tying up, unfurling⁸—and now folding.

Considering the meanings of the word “Owari,” the fact that place is shaping up to be our final venue registers as something of a joke, which does not please me—but as you understand by now, after sticking with me thus far, not everything about this history was under my influence or control.

There will always be surprises.

All I have done, for the history to proceed, was lightly outline the course, and what flowed there was the will of the current.

I believe in the will of water.

Because in my view, this is the primary meaning of history.

Any secondary meanings are too trivial to bear discussion.

Therefore.

Here is my answer to the question Takahito Hida asked.

History—is about people.

About Shichika Yasuri, about Togame the Schemer.

About Princess Negative and Emonzaemon Soda.

About the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

That's history.

My record may be a work of fiction⁹—but their lives are truths.

Exclusive and irreplaceable, and unlost.

In concluding what has been but one treatment of but one version of history, this is the one thing I would hope to leave you with, through these prefatory remarks.

History is about people.

Which makes you a part of history too.

Your version of history may be a total lie—

But your version of yourself is nothing of the sort.

At this juncture, I have no way of knowing who you are, or what sort of a history you are living through—as much as I would love to know, I have no way of knowing, but all the same.

If at all possible.

Never trusting history or hanging¹⁰ on it.

May you simply be yourself.



–Well now.

On that note, let's get started.

Time to unroll the scroll of this war of katanas.

This historical parable of the changing of guards.

The last installment of the Saga of the Swords.

Katanagatari—finished, the end.¹¹

¹ 酔狂 SUIKYŌ “drunk craziness” whimsy; eccentricity ² 価値 KACHI “cost and price”

³ 嘘物語 USOMONOGATARI tale of lies ⁴ 唯一無二 YUI'ITSU MUNI just one, no second ⁵ 文章 BUNSHŌ writing (n.), sentence, composition ⁶ 偽になっちゃう NISE NI NATTE SHIMAU prove to be a fake ⁷ 空想の産物 KŪSŌ NO SANBUTSU “product of empty thoughts”

⁸ 結んで開いて MUSUNDE HIRAITTE “close, open (a scroll)” or hands (in a widely known Japanese nursery rhyme that starts with those words, to music by Jean-Jacques Rousseau) ⁹ 虚構 KYOKŌ “false structure” vs. 虚刀

流 KYOTŌRYŪ Kyotoryu 構え KAMAE form ¹⁰ 頼る TAYORU depend, rely,
lean ¹¹ おしまい、おしまい OSHIMAI, OSHIMAI “over, over” traditional “FIN”
of storytellers

CHAPTER ONE

PARTING
WAYS



■ ■

“To-Togame!”

Gunshots.

Shichika had no hope of understanding these were gunshots. For starters, he had not encountered any sort of firearm over the course of the entire Sword Hunt—which meant that he had no chance of comprehending that those *things* were improved¹ versions of the firearms of their day.

Emonzaemon Soda.

In both hands he held what looked like lumps of metal—but what on earth were they?

Granted, someone from the present-day would recognize them instantly.

In one hand a revolver.

In the other an automatic.

Indeed, these weapons should not, could not exist in this time or place—except this pair of swords was here, a clear and present danger.²

Hence.

“One of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki—the final masterpiece. Ento the Bead.”

Thus.

Emonzaemon—calmly intoned.

“Togame the Schemer. Shichika Yasuri. Together with the eleven swords that you have hunted down—this pair of swords completes the set, rounding out the Twelve Possessed.”

With that.

The sword which Togame the Schemer had fumbled—which Togame and Shichika had freshly prized from Hohoh Maniwa, its former owner, in New Maniwa in Iga—Dokuto the Basilisk, being the eleventh of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki, had been retrieved by Emonzaemon.

The lumps of metal already holstered inside his suit jacket.

“Job well done—Togame the Schemer.”

To this patronizing comment.

Togame the Schemer did not respond.

Could not respond.

Reason being—

The two blasts issued from Ento the Bead had pierced her abdomen, sending her flying—to where she now lay supine in the middle of the road.

Gushing.³

Incessantly—the blood railed from her stomach.

It would not stop.

The seemingly two dozen layers of brash and brilliant finery, her signature style—were taking on the red of blood.

Losing their brash brilliance.

Every detail choked with red.

"Ah...ah, ah, ah, AHH!"

Shichika howled.⁴

Howled like a beast.

What happened?

What was happening?

This was more—than he could comprehend.

Not just the nature of Ento the Bead.

What was happening here—what was going on?

How had things come to this?

Too much—for him to understand.

“Wh-Why, why-is this-”

But he remembered.

Why this must be happening.

In a way—this outcome was predictable.

On their Sword Hunt for the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki.

Deep in the mountains of Iga, at New Maniwa, the stronghold of the Maniwa Ninja Clan, their rivals in the Sword Hunt—they had made a splendid show of capturing Dokuto the Basilisk from Hohoh Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa, effectively the head of the entire ninja clan.

This was the eleventh sword that Togame the Schemer had captured in her

Sword Hunt.

While also settling her score with the Maniwa, her history with whom was fraught.

And so—for all intents and purposes, the Sword Hunt was now over.

Because Togame had deduced⁵ that the last sword, Ento the Bead, was in the ownership of her archnemesis, Princess Negative.

While Togame the Schemer served as Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu—Princess Negative served as Inspector General of the Yanari Shogunate, Owari Bakufu.

The two she-devils of the bakufu.

Hence—one would think that military conflict was behind them, leaving them to parley.

And yet.

On their way back from Iga.

As they were heading home to Owari—

They found Emonzaemon Soda standing in the road.

The confidant of Princess Negative.

The former ninja—Emonzaemon Soda.

Dressed in a coat and trousers, wearing a pair of swords.

Face hidden by a mask, on which were scrawled the words “NON-NINJA.”

It had been a fair amount of time—since they had seen him.

Togame the Schemer declared that Emonzaemon must have guessed that they would capture Dokuto the Basilisk and was waiting for them to arrive, so

they could have a conversation—to which Shichika tended to agree.

But they were wrong.

Emonzaemon—wasted no time attacking Togame.

Using those mysterious lumps of metal.

That fired bullets from their muzzles.

Bang. Bang.

The sound was hollow—but enormous.

“E-E-Emonzaemon!”

Shichika lost his mind—screaming furiously, to which Emonzaemon replied:

“Notwithstanding.”⁶

His mien underneath his mask—obscured.

“Quit barking, Kyotoryu—I’m only doing my job.”

“Wh-Why—do this to Togame!”

“Why? Didn’t I tell you? This woman—the daughter of Takahito Hida, former Kaoyaku of Oshu, and Mastermind of the Rebellion—is Princess Mercy.”⁷

“Princess M-Mercy?”

Togame the Schemer.

Whose actual name and origins were unknown.

Now everything—was illuminated.⁸

Not even Shichika had known her actual name—however.

It was imperative no one in the bakufu discover her to be the daughter of Takahito Hida.

And if Emonzaemon was privy to this detail—Princess Negative surely knew as well.

One way or another, the Inspector General.

Had sussed out her identity.

In which case.

“Right. In which case it makes perfect sense for me to put a bullet or two through the Schemer’s chest. With me, Kyotoryu?”

“Uh—no.”

Shichika was lost.

Fretting.

Seeing this, Emonzaemon explained.

“Honestly, though, the fact that Togame is a relative of Takahito Hida—is such a surprise that I can barely hide it with my mask. I was certain Princess Mercy had been slain in the midst of her escape—the idea that she wormed her way into the center of the bakufu is inconceivable. In the event—she had been able to complete her Sword Hunt, and been celebrated accordingly...the results would have been horrifying.”

“H-How did you find out?”

“Hmm?”

“How—do you know who she is?”

“I wish you hadn’t asked me that.”

Emonzaemon shrugged resignedly.

“This is a rather painful thing to have to tell you—but I have no reason to

worry about your feelings, Kyotoryu. So here it goes. It's all because of you—your deportment⁹ before Her Highness was suspicious. Her Highness noticed something was off.”

Oh, thought Shichika.

That time.

Their second audience with Princess Negative—

When she told them who owned Seito the Garland.

And when she told them—they could find the Garland at Hyakkeijo in Mutsu, Oshu.

Hyakkeijo, the site of Hida Castle—once home of Takahito Hida.

The hometown—of Togame the Schemer.

Hearing this from Princess Negative, Shichika was definitely agitated.

Except he could have sworn—he hid his agitation.

Had hidden it completely.

But the damage had been done.

Shichika had failed—the instant that he let himself experience agitation.

The eyes of Princess Negative.

The eyes of the archnemesis of Togame the Schemer—would never miss the nuances of his deportment.

“So—So what!”

“So what? That explains everything—Takahito Hida was the Mastermind of the Rebellion. As a rule, all his associates are to be killed, without exception. Anything less is tantamount to sheltering the enemy—which makes you an

accomplice.”¹⁰

“...nkk!”

“I must say, this was a tough decision for Her Highness to make—Her Highness never wished for things between her and Togame the Schemer to end this way. A violent outcome is far from what Her Highness wanted,” Emonzaemon continued. “The internecine conflict between Her Highness and Togame the Schemer came to this—all because of you, Kyotoryu.”

“Th-That can’t-be.”

Moaning.

Shichika turned around—seeing the fallen Schemer.

Seeing her kimono turn a darker shade of red.

Seeing the earth puddle with her blood.

[illegible]

He tried to slug Emonzaemon.

No semblance of the methods of the Kyotoryu, a plain old haymaker¹¹—it had no hope of harming Emonzaemon Soda, a former ninja and the confidant of Princess Negative.

Umigame Maniwa.

Oshidori Maniwa.

Pengin Maniwa.

One after another, Emonzaemon had assassinated these infamous¹² Maniwa Bosses without even trying—how could a plain old haymaker work on him?

As to be excepted.

Emonzaemon declined to gratify Shichika with a response, but instead simply took one step backward. Certainly not using Ento the Bead, and not so much as raising Dokuto the Basilisk or either of the swords slung from his hips.

“Notwithstanding,” Emonzaemon repeated. “Kyotoryu. Under the circumstances, I must confess I always knew someday the two of us would fight—I knew that I would have the chance to fight the Kyotoryu with Ento the Bead, the final masterwork of Kiki Shikizaki. Or at the very least, I wanted to. No matter what Her Highness ordered me to do—I’ve had this feeling, all along, that fighting you would be inevitable. For reasons wholly separate from the Sword Hunt.”

“...nkk!”

“Still—my feeling¹³ was way off. At this point, there is no reason whatsoever for the two of us to fight. I now find your existence—inconsequential.”

“Eh-Emonzaemon—”

“Which is why—I showed remorse,” Emonzaemon said, pointing past Shichika—at Togame the Schemer, bleeding on the ground.

“I missed her vital organs—Togame the Schemer lives.”

“Ah...h.”

“She will die any moment—but she is still alive.”

With these words—Emonzaemon turned his back on Shichika.

Turning his back on him, in the middle of their fight.

This meant—that Emonzaemon did not actually conceive of Shichika as an enemy.

Thought nothing of him whatsoever.

Their fight—was nothing to him.

“Have that final conversation—lend her your ear. To Togame the Schemer’s—nay,” Emonzaemon said without emotion, walking away—slipping away from Shichika, “Princess Mercy’s last words.”

“...nkk!”

“To what she might have to say, as she breathes her last.”

Chasing after Emonzaemon—was more than Shichika could bear.

Hearing him talk like this.

He had no choice but to spin around—and rush over to Togame.

Togame the Schemer—had fallen on her back.

By now even her hair of white was taking on the color of blood.

“Togame! Togame—Togame, Togame, Togame, Togame, Togame!”

Shichika took her in his arms and sat her up.

Holding her—unfazed that both his hands were smeared with blood.

“Togame—”

“...I hear you, okay?”

Then.

Finally—Togame answered Shichika.

However weak.

She was herself—the response resolute.

“He shot me in the belly—feels like he tore through my intestines.¹⁴ Well,

then—that must be Ento the Bead. Least we know how it works now.”

“To-Togame—hey!”

Togame calmly analyzed their situation, speaking in a lucid tone that betrayed nothing of her dire situation¹⁵—which served almost to frighten Shichika.

In her condition.

“Togame—get it together!”

“Later, I need for you to look around, behind me. There should be two bullets somewhere...or something like them, anyway. Listen, Shichika. We don’t have time right now for an introductory lesson on firearms—but when you see the bullets, I think your martial instincts¹⁶ will fill in any gaps. Sure these guns are handy—but the point is they can be fired rapidly and continuously.¹⁷ Why else make them that size—”

“Wh-Who cares!” yelled Shichika. “Enough about Ento the Bead!”

Yelling in her ear—as if reproaching her, in the final hour, for fixating on her motive, unable to undo her fixation.

“Too late—figuring out stuff about the Twelve Possessed won’t help us anymore! Now that the truth—is out!”

Togame’s ambition!

Togame’s motive!

Togame’s revenge—all was exposed!

“You’ve lost!” pronounced Shichika.

Emphatically—eyes closed.

“You lost to Princess Negative—lost to the Owari Bakufu!”

“ ...”

“All because of me!”

Shichika—forced the words out.

In a voice thick with remorse.

“Again—because of me, again!”

“ ...”

“Just like what happened—with Dad!”

Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu.

Responsible—for killing his own father, Mutsue Yasuri, the previous master of the school, and the Hero of the Rebellion.

Because—Mutsue tried to kill Shichika’s sister, Nanami Yasuri.

Fearing the absurd genius of Nanami Yasuri enough—he tried to kill his own daughter.

Which forced Shichika to kill him.

But in fact, Mutsue only resolved to kill Nanami after Shichika let slip that her genius was growing stronger by the day.

If Shichika had only been more careful—

Mutsue would probably never have tried to kill Nanami.

And Shichika would not have had to kill Mutsue.

And yet.

Or rather, yet again.

He had repeated—the same mistake!

“Forgive me, Togame—I’m your sword, I wasn’t supposed to hurt you—”

“Would you be quiet for a second?” Togame pleaded gently—so as to soothe Shichika in his distress. “For now...I’m trying to come up with a strategy.”

“Strategy—”

“I mean a scheme, per usual.”

Then Togame softly closed her eyes.

Closing her eyes, as if about to die.

She breathed a heavy sigh as if she were exhaling.¹⁸

Then opened her eyes.

“Hm,” she said. “We’re stuck. No dice.”

“Togame!”

“Just as you say—we’ve failed. At least...I’m the only one dying. Good thing you aren’t dying too.”

“Wh-What are you saying! You can’t die! I-I’ll get a doctor—”

Looking back on their journey.

Did any of the villages have doctors?

If Shichika ran for all he was worth, perhaps—

“Don’t bother,” Togame said. “I thought of that.”

Speaking no differently from usual¹⁹—the same Togame.

“This isn’t about timing—I’m mortally injured. I’ve thought of everything...but the state I’m in, it’s no use. Like the man...Emonzaemon said, he missed my vital organs...but the bleeding is out of control.”

“Th-Then you can use my blood!”

“If that was possible...I’d be standing,²⁰ you idiot. What am I gonna do with you?”

Even at a time like this—Togame poked fun at her bodyguard.

“Shichika.”

“Wh-What now?”

“When I die—I want you to popularize ‘Cheerio’ as a battle cry, throughout Japan...”

“A-Are you serious?!” Shichika berated Togame. “Pull yourself together—stop sounding so weak. With these wounds...you’re barely wounded!”

“I’m done for—this is the end for me... Please, Shichika, I need you to save ‘Cheerio’...”

“You’re out of your mind! How am I supposed to get everyone to use ‘Cheerio’ the wrong way!”

“If anyone can, it’s you... That’s why I chose you, as my sword...”

“No way! Togame...without you, I can’t do anything! There’s no way I could popularize ‘Cheerio’ without you by my side. Togame!”

“Nonsense—in the past year, I’ve taught you everything I know... You no longer need my schemes. Popularizing ‘Cheerio’ should be no sweat for you, by now.”

“Snap out of it! There’s so much stuff you’ve gotta do, Togame!”

“Stuff I’ve gotta do...” Togame let her eyes fall shut and smiled wanly. “Who’s to say I have to do it though... Haha, oh dear, why have I been so hung up on that stuff? Going it alone—trying to avenge the slaughter of my family, the ruin

of my family name...but in our travels together, I finally realized...that perhaps it's all pointless..."

"Uh, Togame?"

"Tomfoolery²¹... True happiness is not found by turning to the past, but by creating a new life, with someone by your side... Somehow, all this time, I failed to realize it was about looking forward, walking together..."

"I-I'm telling you, Togame, you're coming to that realization way too soon—"

"For twenty long years, I've walked this road alone...but in the one year since we've met, you're the one who's done the teaching...about how to live a life."

"No, I couldn't possibly have changed your outlook on life that much!"

"You sure did."

Togame the Schemer.

Coughing up blood—turned bashful.

"You've taught me more important things—than I could ever count."

"..."

"The things I've realized, because of you. Understood, because of you. Discovered, because of you. Too many things to count... Whew, I'm getting dizzy."

Though it made her wince—Togame smiled.

"I had fun, because of you. I was happy, because of you. I smiled and laughed and frolicked, because of you—like I was able to be someone else. Because of you—I felt like I could change."

"Togame—"

“Thing is...”

She was still smiling.

But she added, sadly, “I finally realized that I’ll never change.”

“...”

“This is a fitting way...for me to die.²² I’ve taken this thing far enough. I never had a right—to own you. It turns out I was never qualified to be the owner of Kyoto the Diamond—the magnum opus of Kiki Shikizaki.”

“What the hell—what are you saying! How could that be? No one else—could ever be my owner!”

Shichika was screaming like crazy.

“What happened to making me your confidant—after finishing the Sword Hunt, we were gonna carry on the journey, and make a map together! I was there for you...but it sounds like you weren’t actually there for me! That was all a load of bull!”²³

“Shichika,” Togame said. “I’m the lowest of the low.”

“...”

“You’ve taught me all kinds of things—but I’ve failed to put any of them into practice.²⁴ I was able to change you—but you were unable to change me.”

“This is—”

“All a load of bull,” Togame insisted, dropping her smile. “When the Sword Hunt was over, I was planning to kill you.”

“...nkk!”

“Perhaps stabbing you in the back. Or maybe skewering you in your sleep,

right through the covers. Or even just commanding you to go and off yourself—at any rate. Just as I have in the past—I planned to mix things up, once things were over. Sabotaging—any personal relationships.”

Making him her confidant.

Continuing the journey—all a lie.

That’s what she was saying.

“This—this can’t be.”

“My feelings for you, and learning from you—putting my trust in you, developing a soft spot for you, showing compassion towards you. Every single one of these—was no more than a tool, at the service of my schemes. For me, Shichika—even my own heart is but a pawn. Heart—feelings and compassion. These things are only tools—at my disposal. That is the sort of person that I am. Calculating by nature. I have abandoned everything—there is no heart inside of me. I trusted you. But the me who trusted you—was no more than a pawn.”

“To-Togame—what are you saying!”

“The methods of the Kyotoryu murdered my father—before my very eyes, the Kyotoryu chopped off my father’s head. Hah—how could anybody let that slide?”

Togame spat the words out, as if to push him away.

“My whim to let you get away with it because you represent a new generation, as the Seventh Master—just another piece on the board. Same goes for viewing you as more than a pawn—that too, a piece and nothing more.”

“B-But in that case—what do emotions mean to you?” Shichika raised his voice in anguish. *“Think of all that I’ve experienced—what about the breadth of*

emotion²⁵ I've experienced this year! What about—the feelings that you've shown me how to feel!"

"I told you—pawns. The joy, the anger, the sorrow, the glee²⁶—they're all just another piece to me. Trifling things too insignificant to bother governing."

"..."

"And yet—it seems these things were quite important to you. Compared to who you were in your emotionless, unfeeling days—you're a new person."

"B-But—"

"Wielded in a certain way, emotions become lethal. It's that simple. I'm sure that even you are well aware of that by now."

"S-So what? How come you had to lie like that?" Shichika asked Togame, smiling like he was about to cry. "Your confidant. Your map. Why did you have to say those things—if you told me to die, I would do it on the spot."

"So," Togame answered Shichika—cheerlessly, "the words may have been false—but not the sentiment."

"..."

"I simply thought that was the ideal time to say I had those feelings. Seeing as I knew that they would never come to anything—I felt no need to back it up."

"B-But in that case—"

Shichika—reacting strongly.

Said exactly what he thought.

"In the end, didn't you hurt yourself the most?"

"Sure I did." Togame nodded, as if this was a matter of fact. "Otherwise—I

never could have hatched my schemes.”

“Why—go to such extremes? Why do you need to be the one? No matter what you say—”

As Shichika spoke.

He imagined his father—Mutsue Yasuri.

“—He’s just your father.”

“...”

“How could revenge—be worth abandoning everything? You really think that’s all your life is good for? You’re not your father—you’re you.”

“You’re right—exactly.”

“It’s awful luck your father was murdered, and everyone you know was massacred! But you know what? That leaves you—and only you, in a position to be happy! And yet you beat the living daylights out of yourself, until finally, you’re shot dead along the way—what the hell is wrong with you! Are you a total idiot?”

“Like I said—exactly right. Except—”

Once again—Togame had turned bashful.

“At the moment—I’m really happy.”

With an air of joy.

With an air of anger.

With an air of sorrow.

With an air of glee.

She was bashful.

“I’m so happy—I was shot dead along the way.”

“...nkk!”

“Because now, I won’t have to kill you. Nothing could make me happier.”

This is what Togame the Schemer—had to say.

“Finally...finally, at long last...I can finally...let go of²⁷ everything.”

“...Is dying the only way that you could stop?”

Shichika noticed—the huge²⁸ tears flooding Togame’s eyes.

And began to bawl his eyes out²⁹ in turn.

This.

Being certain proof—of the brimming fullness³⁰ of their feelings for each other.

“Did you have to take things this far—before you could stop?”

“It’s not your fault,” Togame said—though crying a great deal. “At this point, I almost want to thank the Princess. By noticing that your deportment was suspicious, she has freed me—at last, I am free of this obsession.”³¹

“...”

“If you see the Princess—please send along my thanks. Although...”

Pausing midsentence—Togame turned her head, looking off to the side.

“Perhaps you will not have the chance.”

“T-Togame.”

“Shichika Yasuri—Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu. This is your final order.”

With this declaration³²—Togame looked straight into Shichika’s eyes.

She may have been about to die—

But her gaze was anything but hollow.

Harboring a stark light.

“Forget about me—forget everything that ever happened, and live life as you please.”

“As I please...”

“Under no circumstances are you to carry out my mission—with my death, your contract will be terminated.”

“...”

“You are free to return to the island, as you wish—but nobody is forcing you. After all, Mutsue and Nanami are both gone—and I promised Nanami I would surface you, put you out there in the world.”

“Y-You promised sis—”

“Seems as though I won’t be able to make good on³³ my promise to restore the honor of the Kyotoryu—although I doubt you will be punished as an accomplice to the daughter of Takahito Hida. They’ll probably decide that I used the Kyotoryu to my advantage, tricking you to carry out my schemes. Why else—would Emonzaemon shoot me and let you go? From this moment—you are free.”

“...”

“You might visit Triad Shrine, where you can be with Konayuki—or why not the Heartland School? Zanki Kiguchi let you be her follower before. She wouldn’t do you wrong. Thing is, you’re made for naive³⁴ types like them.”

“Of all the times to start that up again!”

“This is the perfect time.”

What Togame said—made Shichika realize.

Her stomach.

Togame the Schemer’s stomach—which had caught the pair of bullets fired by Emonzaemon Soda.

The stomach wounds which had incessantly been oozing life—at some point.

Had stopped bleeding.

Almost as if.

All of the blood—had been bled from her body.

Togame the Schemer’s complexion.

By now—was whiter than her hair.

“You fell for me, but it’s over now. I don’t want to—hold you back.”





“Ah, ahh—”

“I am no longer your master, as you are no longer my bodyguard. I am shuffling off—this mortal coil.³⁵ I die a failure, left to rot.”

“...”

“Forgive me—for my inability to wield a katana such as yourself.”

“Come on—without you, I’d have been dead from the get-go—bent and broken—rusted, done.”

On Haphazard Island, with Komori Maniwa.

In Inaba Desert, with Ginkaku Uneri.

At Triad Shrine, with Meisai Tsuruga.

Across Ganryu Island, with Hakuhei Sabi.

By Dakuon Harbor, with Kanara Azekura.

Atop Mt. Odori, with Konayuki Itezora.

Within Gokenji Temple, with Nanami Yasuri.

Anent Lake Fuyo, with Skytron.

Inside Shogi Village in Tendo, with Zanki Kiguchi.

Over Hyakkeijo, with Rinne Higaki.

Amid New Maniwa, with Hohoh Maniwa.

He had been fighting—all this time.

Only surviving thanks to Togame, by his side.

Togame was his reason for fighting.

Without her—he would have been long gone.

Bent and broken—rusted.

“You no longer need to fight for me.”

But now Togame proclaimed loud and clear³⁶—

Though losing all the blood her body had—loud and clear...

“Forget all of my directives. Forget everything about me—who to the very end, failed to see you as anything other than a pawn. A disgrace of a stupid³⁷ woman who, moreover, failed at using you as a pawn. Forget me—and live your life.”

“This is absurd... I loved—being around you.”

Shichika spoke through his tears, like he was talking to himself.

Sobbing—like a child.

“I loved you—so much.”

“Shichika.”

“What now—what am I supposed to do? I’m useless without you.”

“Skip the childish blather. You fool—looks like you’ll never grow up, will you? Honestly—I feel bad for you.”

It made Togame miserable—to see Shichika like this.

Then—she raised her hand.

And softly—stroked his cheek.

“Hey—Shichika,” she said.

Wiping away his tears.

Clear indication—of his growth.

Togame the Schemer—Princess Mercy spoke.

Saying the one thing she had never felt it necessary to think about, as she envisioned every possible eventuality and exercised an all-encompassing sense of caution—but these were parting³⁸ words.

“I’ve done as I pleased, and behaved selfishly, unable to think of anything but my revenge. Death is the only cure for me. I treated you terribly, like you were no more than a tool. I’m an awful woman, without a saving grace, who deserves the grave I’ve made myself—but...”

Togame spoke her mind.

Without embellishment.

“Would it be okay if I fell for you?”

■ ■

Togame the Schemer, Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu.

Gunned down³⁹—her ambitions thwarted.

With that, the bloodline of Takahito Hida, Kaoyaku of Oshu and the Mastermind of the Rebellion—was extinguished.

¹ 進化した SHINKA SHITA evolved ² 巖然として存在した GENZEN TO SHITE

SONZAI SHITA existed sternly, or grimly ³ どくどくと DOKU DOKU TO onomatopoeia for copious spillage echoes 毒刀 DOKUTŌ Dokuto ⁴ 咆哮 HŌKŌ wail like an animal ⁵ 看破 KANPA see through ⁶ 不取合 TORI AWAZU not worthy of notice ⁷ 容赦姫 YŌSHA HIME “Pardon Princess” vs. とがめ TOGAME blame ⁸ 詳らかに TSUMABIRAKA NI clear, detailed ⁹ 挙動 KYODŌ conduct ¹⁰ 同罪扱い DŌZAI ATSUKAI “treated as (having committed) the same crime”

¹¹ 勢いに任せたこぶし IKIOI NI MAKASETA KOBUSHI fist relying on (nothing but) momentum ¹² 名だたる NADATARU renowned ¹³ 予想 YOSŌ expectation ¹⁴ 内臓を引っ掻き回された NAIZŌ WO HIKKAKI MAWASARETA got her viscera churned ¹⁵ 瀕死の状態 HINSHI NO JŌTAI a condition near death ¹⁶ 戦闘感覚 SENTŌ KANKAKU battle sense ¹⁷ 速射性と連射性 SOKUSHASEI TO RENSHASEI able to unload quickly and repeatedly ¹⁸ 深呼吸する SHINKOKYŪ SURU take deep breaths ¹⁹ 平常時 HEIJŌJI “normal times”

²⁰ 苦労はない KURŌ WA NAI there would be no trouble ²¹ お笑い草 OWARAI GUSA “laughing grass” laughingstock ²² 死に様 SHINIZAMA “death style”

²³ 全部、嘘だったのか ZENBU, USO DATTANOKA “was all of it a lie?”

²⁴ 生かす IKASU bring to life; let live ²⁵ 喜怒哀楽 KIDO AIRAKU joy, anger, sorrow, glee ²⁶ 喜びも怒りも哀しみも楽しみも YOROKOBI MO IKARI MO KANASHIMI MO TANOSHIMI MO unpacks the compound word employed by Shichika ²⁷ やめる YAMERU quit ²⁸ 大粒の涙 ŌTSUBU NO NAMIDA large bits of tears ²⁹ 滂沱の涙 BŌDA NO NAMIDA flood of tears

³⁰ 満ち溢れんばかり[...]満ちている MICHİ AFUREN BAKARI[...]MICHITE IRU
full to overflowing ³¹ 血道 CHIMICHI “bloody road” infatuation ³² 前置き
MAEOKI “put in front” preface, preamble ³³ 守る MAMORU protect; keep
(pact) ³⁴ 純真 JUNSHIN “pure and true” simplistic ³⁵ ただの-死にゆく者
TADANO-SHINIYUKU MONO “just-a dying person”

³⁶ はっきり HAKKIRI onomatopoeia for lucid or cognizable speech, logic,
sound, *etc.*

³⁷ 無様な[...]馬鹿な BUZAMA NA[...]BAKA NA “ungraceful dummy of a”

³⁸ 散り際 CHIRI GIWA “near scattering (like petals)” the moments before
death ³⁹ 凶弾に倒れる KYŌDAN NI TAORERU “felled by evil bullets” usu. in
a political assassination

CHAPTER TWO
MASATSUNA
YANARI



The two she-devils of the bakufu.

One being Togame the Schemer.

The other being Princess Negative.

These women, whose actual names and origins were unknown, were often discussed in the same breath—and indeed enjoyed no small amount of political rivalry, but that does not mean their interests coincided or for that matter were in opposition.

The Schemer had her motives, to which the circumstances¹ of Princess Negative were irrelevant.

So, too, did Princess Negative have her motives, to which the circumstances of the Schemer—were irrelevant.

Their interests coincided in but one arena,² that being the Sword Hunt for the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

Except the manner in which the Schemer and Princess Negative understood the Twelve Possessed could not have been more different.

To the Schemer, it was all only a ruse, no more than an expedient to her revenge, a view which applied to her own feelings and the Twelve Possessed in kind.

But to Princess Negative—the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki were objects having plenty meaning in their own right.

The fact that her adversary, the Schemer, had hunted down the masterworks on her behalf—was more than she could have bargained for.

To be sure, she saw it coming.

Just as Emonzaemon Soda saw it coming.

Acting on the assumption that the eleventh sword was captured—they would face off against the Schemer and the Kyotoryu, in a final showdown.

As it turns out, what they saw coming never came—but that did not mean Princess Negative was left sitting on her hands.

Princess Negative.

Princess Negative had her own motives.

Now that Emonzaemon had finished off³ the Schemer—there was no one in the bakufu who could stop Princess Negative.

Any potential threats to her supremacy—had already been wiped out, thanks to the powers of the Inspector General. Thus was the focus of her office.

All but the Schemer had been crushed.

But now the Schemer—would scheme no more.

Therefore.

At long last, it was time to make her move.

Finally, the time had come for Princess Negative, descendant of legendary swordsmith Kiki Shikizaki, who had reigned over the Age of Warring States—to bring this chapter of history, as she saw it, to a close.



Owari—seat of the Yanari Shogunate.

At the center of which stood Owari Castle.

Whose immensity and magnificence⁴ set it a league above Gekoku Castle—and whose structure was both intricate and fantastic, making it a fortress to be reckoned with, so robust were its defenses.

Though things had not been this way forever.

In the twenty years since the rebellion—the bulwarks of the castle had been strengthened to what might rightly be called an excessive⁵ degree—to prevent even the slightest chance of harm to any member of the inner circle at the castle.

The keep of the same Owari Castle.

The uppermost chamber of which gazed upon Owari Town—and, one could be forgiven for imagining, at the entire nation.

A blond-haired blue-eyed woman.

Whose beauty was anomalous in this land.

But whose kimono, however Japanese, fit like it was made for her—

Princess Negative—had been summoned.

Of course, given the circumstances, Princess Negative lacked the status to

occupy the seat of honor.

Before her—

Beyond the bamboo screen,⁶ there was a silhouette.

“Welcome. Lift your visage.”

The voice came from the seat of honor—addressing Princess Negative, whose forehead had been pressed to the tatami.

“You sit before none but—Masatsuna Yanari,⁷ Eighth Shogun of the Owari Bakufu.”

“Forgive me, Your Excellency, for I am much obliged,” said Princess Negative.

Raising her head—with the utmost caution.

This was the Eighth Shogun of the Owari Bakufu.

Top of the top.

That woman never gained his audience.

Surely, Princess Negative thought, this is what the Schemer always wanted. After all, the Schemer had only worked her way into the bakufu so she could gain this audience—and the last step in her plan had been to capture all of the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki.

The Schemer had failed.

Granted, Princess Negative had made her fail—

But her efforts were far from inconsequential.

As a result—her mortal enemy, Princess Negative, had now gained the audience of the shogun.

“But Your Excellency,” said Princess Negative.

Glancing at the figures packed into the room around her—which was not so spacious as one might expect.

One, two—counting eleven.

Eleven others.

Less Princess Negative and the shogun, Masatsuna, there were eleven on the floor.

These conditions did not favor Princess Negative.

“Your Excellency—I had requested to speak with you in private.”⁸

“Your reputation precedes you—for a woman, you have no compunctions about speaking your mind.”

Then.

Beyond the bamboo—Masatsuna laughed.

Judging from his voice, it would seem he was an old man, well along in years.

Princess Negative was unaware of the exact age of the shogun—but she figured that the Schemer must have known.

If she had not known at least the age of the shogun who held the reins during the late Rebellion—it would have been bizarre.

“Given what we are to discuss, I sympathized with your request to have my retainers⁹ take leave of the court, which I have ordered them to do, but the Guardians¹⁰ are my protectors. They refuse to leave my side.”

“ ... ”

“Fear not. They come from a lineage of direct servants to the shogun—their bond is absolute, so there is no risk of betrayal. They are on a fundamentally

different level from the other lords, who only see each other as rivals—one might say our hearts beat as one.”¹¹

“Verily so, Your Excellency.”

Inside.¹²

Princess Negative—was cracking up.

Beat as one?

What an absurd thing—to say so lightly.

Perhaps he was senile,¹³ or maybe he had always been this way.

Regardless—as the Eighth Shogun, he merely picked up where the last left off, making this par for the course.

Shortly after arriving at court, Princess Negative had completed her estimation¹⁴ of Masatsuna Yanari.

And as you might expect, she did not think so very highly of His Excellency.

However—this was in fact a boon for Princess Negative.

—So, His Excellency thinks their hearts beat as one?

—He makes it sound like they’re as tight as me and Emonzaemon.

“Well then, Your Excellency—please allow me to address what brings me here,” said Princess Negative—getting down to business. “I am speaking of the origin and legend—of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.”

“Before we begin, I want us to be clear. You are the descendant of the so-called¹⁵ legendary swordsmith—Kiki Shikizaki, are you not?”

“Yes.”

So-called legendary swordsmith.

So-called, huh—thought Princess Negative.

As was the case with most in the upper ranks of the bakufu, and so too for the shogun, at the apex—that legendary swordsmith whom Princess Negative regarded as a respected ancestor was an enigma.

Nay, until recently, they probably never heard of him.

The Age of Warring States was one thing—in those days, Kiki Shikizaki was a living legend, but these were times of peace and order, when there were few battles deserving to be chronicled as such.

Hence—thanks to the Sword Hunt plotted and executed by Togame the Schemer, and the reports which she had sent back to the bakufu each time they rounded up a sword, the notoriety¹⁶ of Kiki Shikizaki had skyrocketed.¹⁷

—That nasty woman.

—Shameless¹⁸—fearless.

—Ah, to be her.

Of course, it was only thanks to Togame that she could craft this scenario—which meant that Princess Negative was not without her share of gratitude.

She forgot about the other eleven souls.

Rejected them.

And facing Masatsuna Yanari, beyond the bamboo screen—proffered a response.

“Indeed I am.”

“Do you have any proof?”

“Proof? Only fools rely on proof when casting judgment—rather take heed of what I have to say, and judge accordingly.”

“Quite a claim. Well then, begin.”

“Much obliged.”

Nodding—Princess Negative drew her metal fan from her kimono and threw it open—*snap!*

“The man you know as Kiki Shikizaki—was not always a swordsmith.”

Here—is where she opted to begin.

She wasn’t aware, having stayed in Owari the whole time, that Togame the Schemer had come by this particular detail via Hohoh Maniwa, when he was under the influence of¹⁹ Dokuto the Basilisk.

However.

As the descendant of Kiki Shikizaki—Princess Negative knew so much more than whatever the Schemer learned in her limited exchange with Hohoh.

“Shikizaki—came from a long line of soothsayers.”

“Soothsayers, you say?”

Masatsuna sounded surprised.

Genuinely intrigued.

“Not a trade—you hear of every day.”

“He is variously called an alchemist²⁰ and a sorcerer²¹—compared to which I daresay he was more serious than people realize.”

Princess Negative went on.

“Extending back thousands of years, this lineage of soothsayers—though not exactly noble, nevertheless boasts a long history.”

Princess Negative gave the word *history* extra emphasis.

That said, none of the eleven who surrounded her, or Masatsuna for that matter, understood its special meaning.

“In that case, do I understand—that you, too, are a soothsayer?”

“No. The family practice of soothsaying was brought to a halt with Kiki Shikizaki. Singlehandedly—he put a stop to that tradition.”

“And why would he do that?”

“Because of his mission—the mission of the entire clan,” said Princess Negative, waving her metal fan. “*Our mission*, if you’ll permit me to include myself in such a manner—being to revise history.”

“Revise—history?”

“Yes. A soothsayer sees the future. And our mission has been to change the future that we see—before it happens. *Our mission—is changing history*,” Princess Negative boasted. “Thus you have the Twelve Possessed.”

“The Twelve Possessed, you say?”

“Indeed. Forgive me, Your Excellency, but please allow me to explain—Kiki Shikizaki, the legendary swordsmith who effectively reigned over the Age of Warring States, created a set of swords known as the Mutant Blades, the number of which owned by a state was a direct indication of its power—”

Princess Negative paused.

For effect.

“—Which is precisely what Kiki Shikizaki had intended,” she said. “Whereby,

his reign exceeds the figurative. One might say Kiki Shikizaki literally reigned over the Age of Warring States.”

“...”

“I will now apprise you of the twelve masterworks the Schemer hunted down.”

Zetto the Leveler.

Zanto the Razor.

Sento the Legion.

Hakuto the Whisper.

Zokuto the Armor.

Soto the Twin.

Akuto the Eel.

Bito the Sundial.

Oto the Cured.

Seito the Garland.

Dokuto the Basilisk.

Ento the Bead.

“Though all thousand of the Mutant Blades that Kiki Shikizaki forged were heterodox swords, distinctly different from what we normally envision when we speak of the katana, these masterworks comprise the most heterodox of all. One might even say the other nine hundred and eighty-eight swords were merely prototypes for these twelve.”

“Hmm.”

“A sword absolutely impossible to bend or break, harder than anything on earth—”

Zetto the Leveler.

“A keen sword, able to slice through any substance in a single swing—”

Zanto the Razor.

“A sword formidable for its disposability, with numerous replacements at the ready—”

Sento the Legion.

“A comely sword that is both light as a down²² and fragile as glasswork—”

Hakuto the Whisper.

“A sword modeled on a suit of armor, with an emphasis on defense, having immense armor class—”

Zokuto the Armor.

“A sword of such tremendously dense mass it cannot even be lifted—”

Soto the Twin.

“A wicked sword that will not let its owner to die, keeping them alive indefinitely—”

Akuto the Eel.

“A sword that is both weapon and human, in the form of a lovable, deadly doll—”

Bito the Sundial.

“A didactic,²³ detoxifying²⁴ sword, which corrects both heart and soul and makes you walk the righteous road—”

Oto the Cured.

“A curious sword, appearing differently depending on the person, so as to place their life philosophy upon the scales—”

Seito the Garland.

“The sword most potently endowed with Shikizaki venom, which makes its owner want to kill—”

Dokuto the Basilisk.

“A projectile sword, allowing for repeated and precise attacks from a great distance—”

Ento the Bead.

“These twelve swords are the masterworks, the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.”

“Am I to understand this so-called Schemer captured all of these—*under your supervision?*”²⁵

“Correct,” she nodded.

This angle was considerably flawed—but by now had become something of a fact.

Stealing credit—had never been her goal.

However.

Princess Negative had bested the Schemer—and the rest was history.

And there it was again—the *so-called* Schemer.

Princess Negative had her own feelings about what happened.

But deeming it was best to hold her tongue²⁶—she carried on.

“For the record, together with the nine hundred and eighty-eight other ordinary Mutant Blades, which have long been tucked safely in the Third Armory of Owari Castle—at this juncture, *each and every one* of the Mutant Blades created by Kiki Shikizaki is now in our possession. Something not even the Old Shogun was able to accomplish.”

“Well!”

Hearing this.

Masatsuna Yanari let slip a haughty chuckle—as if taking all the credit for himself.

Despite having done nothing for the cause, not even giving out a single order.

Acting as if His Excellency, Masatsuna Yanari, had now transcended the Old Shogun.

Of course, Princess Negative was in no position to rectify this misconception.

Letting it go, without contesting it—she continued.

“The Mutant Blades are gathered in a single place. An outcome—which Kiki Shikizaki factored into his grand design.”

“How now? What do you mean by that? Was not his mission—to foment chaos among the Warring States?”

“Please. Revising history amounts to no such thing. He did not venture to upturn society for larks.²⁷ In a word, his mission—our mission, was to reform society.”²⁸

“Reform society—you say?”

“Your Excellency. About the characteristics of the Twelve Possessed, as previously set forth—are you not puzzled about how Kiki Shikizaki could invest

his creations with characteristics that outstrip the bounds of common sense?”

“Me?”

In answer to this inquiry from Princess Negative, Masatsuna Yanari shook his head.

“Why should I find it puzzling? Isn’t that the whole point of these things?”

“...”

Princess Negative affected a radiant²⁹ smile.

So as to make herself appear smitten by “His Excellency”—the man’s caliber.³⁰

—Isn’t that the point of these things?

—He certainly has a point there.

Now that he mentioned it, she did recall the Schemer saying as much at some point or another—or had she mentioned something to this effect in one of her reports?

Either way.

The fact that the same remark could have such a different impact coming from a different person—was rather remarkable.

The Schemer had a talent for not thinking about things that would be better left unthought.

Something altogether different from not thinking at all.

Different from tossing out ideas—as this occasion underscored.

—Kinda funny, really.

On the inside, Princess Negative was cracking up.

Humored by the critical comparisons she had been making between Masatsuna, enthroned before her, and the Schemer—

Though it was readily apparent—who was more fit to be in charge.³¹

That was without question—³²

—Without question, the daughter of Takahito Hida.

Takahito Hida—Kaoyaku of Oshu.

“To put it simply, the Mutant Blades are swords that have been manufactured using methods from the future. Even that which seems impossible today—will become matter-of-fact in one hundred, two hundred, or perhaps a thousand years.”

“...”

“How much of our technology did not exist as recently as one or two centuries ago? The same goes for the future. And Kiki Shikizaki had the ability to perceive it—he had clairvoyance. One might say he was a most talented soothsayer—for his powers were the strongest in the history of our clan. His powers were so vast—they made him legendary.”

“Well. I must say I care little for the history of swords,” said Masatsuna. Perhaps the explanation had gone over his head. “What matters is the reason Kiki Shikizaki went to such great lengths.”

“Of course.”

Princess Negative nodded obediently. Without changing her expression.

“This talk of revising history—I fail to understand what would make such a thing necessary. Aren’t soothsayers normally disinclined to change the future?”

“Unfortunately—as I mentioned, changing the future is our mission,” said

Princess Negative. “This sets us apart from the average lot of soothsayers.”

“Alright. But is the future, or fate, even open to change?”

“The future and fate aside—history can be changed for certain. In fact, my clan has been doing so for generations—though as I mentioned previously, Kiki Shikizaki bled dry our family stores of clairvoyance, so I cannot claim to have much of a knack for it.”

“What a pity.”

Clearly—Masatsuna was disappointed.

This probably would have been a decent time to fib—but it would never do to get his hopes up.

At least this way, she was not overselling herself.

“That said, history has the ability to correct itself—we can try to change it all we want, but it will push back, trying to stay on course. In an attempt to right itself.”

“To right itself—tell me, did you not just speak of reforming society?”

“I did, but that was just a turn of phrase. To be sure, we see ourselves as revolutionaries—but you might call the work we’ve done a kind of Antihistory.”³³

“Antihistory.”

“Consider—Takahito Hida.”

Thinking immediately of the Schemer.

Of their history of rivalry.

And of the hardships Princess Negative endured thanks to her—she spoke.

“He was a *righter*³⁴ of history.”

“...?”

“Twenty years ago, Takahito Hida instigated the conflict we now refer to as the Rebellion—but people seem a little too content not asking why.”

“Oh—Hida. Not a name I hoped to hear today,” Masatsuna groaned—making no attempt to conceal his displeasure. “You’re asking why he bothered instigating such a conflict?”

“Precisely. Takahito Hida was—well, ‘pacifist’³⁵ might sound complimentary, but he was a man who hated fighting with a passion, so poorly suited for the battlefield he was unfit to be the ruler of a state.” To avoid offending His Excellency, Princess Negative intentionally slandered Takahito Hida. “The question is—what would make this man decide to instigate rebellion on the national scale, amid these times of peace and order?”

“Because he desired the world?”

“That would be the popular opinion—but in truth, it was an effort to right history. Takahito Hida,” concluded Princess Negative, “*was trying to correct history.*”

“Trying—to right history.”

“As you will recall from the reports of the Schemer, Seito the Garland was buried deep beneath Hida Castle, of which Takahito Hida was once the lord and master—although its actual owner was one Rinne Higaki, Hermit Magus—”

“What? Hermit Magus?”

“Oh—forget I said anything.”

Veering off into that territory would be hazardous.

Barring the exceptional cases of Hakuhei Sabi and Nanami Yasuri, the owner of whom Princess Negative was most wary was Rinne Higaki. She never meant to say that name again—

But that was immaterial.

Granted.

A hermit magus like Rinne Higaki, and a sword saint like Hakuhei Sabi, and a genius like Nanami Yasuri—had only ever been born because Princess Negative and her ancestors had revised history.

Though as with the Maniwa and the Itezora Clan.

...Things had not worked out as expected.

This too—perhaps an indication of the ability of history to right itself.

“At any rate—Takahito Hida understood the situation, albeit in an irregular manner. He knew the nature of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki—and was sharp enough to ascertain the mission of Kiki Shikizaki, and our mission for that matter. He ascertained—our Antihistory.”

“Sharp enough—huh?” intoned the shogun.

“Yes.”

Was even such a mild compliment toward Takahito Hida disagreeable to him?

If so, his caliber was low indeed.

Though perhaps—low caliber was an essential attribute of the powerful.³⁶

Besides, Masatsuna had been shafted.³⁷

Because of Takahito Hida, he would go down in history as the only shogun in this age of peace and order whose regime was marked by conflict.

–Go down in history?

–If you're lucky.

“Or perhaps not sharp enough, so much as aided by the powers of Seito the Garland—since that sword gauges the balance of your deeds. That said, because he was not actually its owner, he could not have held the sword himself—which is to say, Takahito Hida was not so privy to the truths of history after all. He merely—tossed a stone into the proverbial pond of history, to see what kind of ripples he could make.”

“That man,” said Masatsuna, “could hope for little more.”

“...”

Princess Negative could care less about how Masatsuna saw Takahito Hida—however.

Now was not the time—to let him know.

Were Masatsuna to discover that the Schemer, Grand Commander of Arms of the Yanari Shogunate Military Directorate, Owari Bakufu—Togame the Schemer, was Hida’s only daughter, how would the man behind the bamboo screen react?

The Sword Hunt plotted and executed by the Schemer had turned out to be a happy accident³⁸ for Princess Negative.

Far more than she could have ever bargained for.

And yet—her being the daughter of Takahito Hida added a wrinkle³⁹ to the situation.

The stone that Takahito Hida tossed into the pond of history.

Created—ripples.

Which in the end—resulted in a complete recovery of the Mutant Blades, the first time anyone had accomplished such a feat.

Of course, this outcome was contrary to what Takahito Hida had intended—since it only steered a wrong version of history in an even worse direction.

However.

—Though we never met.

—I reckon he must have been a fine man.

Musing over this—Princess Negative couldn't help but smirk.

“There's one other important thing to mention.”

“Well?”

“The Old Shogun, as he is commonly known—was another righter of history.”

The first man in recorded history⁴⁰ to unite the nation.

The man who lost his head over⁴¹ the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki.

“The Great Sword Hunt—that outrageous act of legislation which attempted to collect every single sword in the entirety of Japan. The official motive of the law was to erect the Katana Buddha at Seiryoin Gokenji Temple in Tosa, while the ulterior motive was to rid the world of swordsmen, but the Old Shogun's true motive was to round up all the swords of Kiki Shikizaki—or so they say, but although all of this is true, there is another—shall we say, core motive—at play as well.”

“Would that be correcting history?”

“Sure, that would be one way of putting it—you see, if the Old Shogun was of a mind to, I doubt he would have been incapable of capturing the Twelve

Possessed. Had he deployed all of his military resources, at the very least he could have captured Oto the Cured—which makes it odd he failed to do so. The only explanation is that the Old Shogun was not simply collecting swords, but acting on an imperative to correct history.”

“I take it—he succeeded?”

“No, I am afraid not. In the end, he was bereft of his military and financial wherewithal, and died in obscurity⁴²—whereupon the current Yanari Shogunate took his place.”

“ ... ”

Masatsuna fell silent, as if interpreting this as an assertion that the Old Shogun was superior to the current shogunate.

Oh well.

*If his caliber is that low, there’s no use walking on eggshells.*⁴³

“That is, the Old Shogun may have failed to correct history—but he certainly was a hindrance to our master plan. He put us two hundred years behind schedule, while Takahito Hida set us back another twenty. The plan should have been completed by the generation after Kiki Shikizaki—but it has dragged on all the way to mine, a fact which frankly is a pox⁴⁴ on our entire lineage.”

“I see,” Masatsuna knowingly asserted, though it was unclear how much of this he actually understood. “And has your family’s mission—been accomplished now, thanks to your efforts?”

“Not quite yet.⁴⁵ The plan has yet to reach fruition—but as I mentioned earlier, now that all thousand of the Mutant Blades have been recovered, we are finally at the final stage.”

Unlike the Old Shogun.

They could gather them less systematically.

Nevertheless—had the Schemer not been the one responsible for the hunt, things probably would not have gone as smoothly, or as rapidly.

“Well, now. In light of your account, there’s one thing that I need you to explain to me.”

“Of course.”

She suspected there was more than just one thing, but could not say so.

“What drove you and your kin to mess around with revising history in the first place?”

“Ah—a vital detail,” Princess Negative conceded.

Certainly.

This could not have been surmised without an explanation.

“If pressed—I would say that we are doing it for the good of the country, for Japan.”

“What?”

“Your Excellency, have you ever laid eyes on the lands beyond the sea?”

Masatsuna—declined to answer.

Which likely meant the answer was no.

“Since I am not clairvoyant—I cannot say this with certainty, but in about a hundred years, this nation will be invaded and destroyed by a group of foreign powers.”

Without fanfare.

Princess Negative made this nevertheless outrageous declaration—smiling all the while.

“This prophecy⁴⁶ dating back a few thousand years—was passed down from the first generation of our lineage.”

“Destroyed...you say?”

“Indeed.”

Masatsuna sounded genuinely surprised and shaken—but Princess Negative answered him like this was nothing.

“Destroyed.”

“Impossible!”

“Down the line, the Edicts of Seclusion which currently obtain will no longer be tenable—have you had a look at this device they call a globe? When you see how small this country really is—it takes your breath away.”

“S-Still—destroyed...”

Startled by some kind of an epiphany, Masatsuna’s voice went shrill.

“B-But hasn’t this prediction, this history, been revised already?”

Rather convenient a notion, thought an exasperated Princess Negative.

“No, hence why I said that we were only at the final stage. In practice—fortune has dug itself a fairly deep rut, which makes altering its course no easy task.”

“B-But—did you not say the Mutant Blades were crafted using methods from the future? How could there be new methods—if this country is destroyed?”

“The prognostications of Kiki Shikizaki were far from limited to this land—the methods used to craft the Mutant Blades were mostly devised overseas,”

Princess Negative explained. “That is, all but the underlying insights of katana smithery⁴⁷—the soul of the samurai, indeed.”

“H-Hence—reforming society?”

“Since I am no clairvoyant, I hesitate to say this with finality—but judging from the research performed by my staff,⁴⁸ it will happen without question, in light of what is afoot overseas.”

“What will happen?”

“A war—and an invasion,” Princess Negative said softly. “This nation has been the agent and the object of no shortage of such wars—but the conflict a hundred years from now will be of an entirely different magnitude. After all these years of continuous isolation, our country will be overrun.”⁴⁹

“And your clan...”

Masatsuna’s voice—had not yet settled down.

“They saw this a few thousand years ago—predicting our destruction, and have been working ever since to prevent it from happening?”

“That is what we live for,” Princess Negative insisted. “That and nothing more. I’m aware how high and mighty that must sound—but I say that all the credit goes to Kiki Shikizaki. Those before him in our lineage lived so he could be; those following him exist to carry out his mission.”

“What does that mean?”

“Think of it this way—as you can see quite plainly, foreign blood flows through my veins. This alien blood was added to our lineage from the outside at an opportune moment, for a specific purpose. In order to prepare us for the days sure to come—to allow us to deepen our knowledge of foreign ways, we

resorted to that manipulation.”

“...”

“The clairvoyance fizzled out with Kiki Shikizaki—what were we supposed to do? This may or may not have been worth all the effort—but one way or another, I think it helped further our mission.”

“And that is why—you deemed the Sword Hunt necessary?”

“What I deemed necessary—was amassing the scattered swords in one location.”

“I see.”

“And now that we have gathered up all thousand of the Mutant Blades, what on earth will happen next? One legend has it he who collects all the swords will rule the world, while another legend claims that they will guarantee endless prosperity—”

Then.

When Princess Negative was in the middle of her thought.

“Princess Negative.”

The voice—came from the ceiling.

Throwing the room into a state of commotion—riling Masatsuna and all eleven of the Guardians, some of whom reached for their swords.

But Princess Negative was not the least bit surprised.

Did not so much as bother looking up.

The person hiding⁵⁰ in the ceiling.

The voice which they had heard.

Was none other than Princess Negative's confidant—Lieutenant Emonzaemon Soda.

"Hush." Inexorably cool—Princess Negative pointed her metal fan toward the ceiling. "Late again, you imbecile."

Their usual dynamic.

"Well—what is it now?"

"I have a report for you," said the voice behind the ceiling—Emonzaemon. "Just moments ago—an intruder made it through the castle walls."

"An intruder?"

"Yes," the voice confirmed. "Through the main gate of the castle—forcing his way in."

"And why are you reporting this to me?" Princess Negative closed the metal fan that she was pointing at the ceiling. "At the moment—I am in the middle of a very important conversation."

"Yes—but the intruder," Emonzaemon said, in the coldest tone imaginable, "appears to be the Kyotoryu."

"Hm."

Rather surprising.

And yet—Princess Negative connected everything in no time. Inside her head—all the parts missing from the plan passed down from the time of Kiki Shikizaki, all the gaps in the storyline, in that instant—coalesced.

"Hm...the Kyotoryu. Okay, so that's what happened—Hakuhei Sabi, too...huh. Well, then. I suppose that makes the magnum opus...ah yes, of course...that's what Yasuri means? Rather unexpected...or a bit spot-on...or a coincidence. Or

wait, could this be fate? But then perhaps—this could all be a part of Kiki Shikizaki’s master plan.”

“You fool—what are you saying?”

Beyond the bamboo screen.

Masatsuna—did not sound happy.

“Forget this intruder. Kyotoryu? I know I’ve heard that name before, but no matter. The sentries will rapidly dispatch such a disruptive annoyance. Go on, you were saying?”

“Your Excellency.”

Princess Negative—

Threw open the metal fan.

Whereupon she stood—no trace of the affected smirk from earlier, wearing instead a maniacal grin that spanned from ear to ear.

And—in characteristic fashion, proceeded to reject His Excellency’s words.

“We are finished.”

¹ 立場 TACHIBA “standing spot” position ² 事象 JISHŌ phenomenon; happening

³ 始末 SHIMATSU take care of (a problem); kill ⁴ 莊嚴 SŌGON solemnity

⁵ 過剰 KAJŌ gratuitous; unnecessary

⁶ 御簾 MISU rolling blinds of thin bamboo, used as a visual barrier at a shrine or palace ⁷ 家鳴匡綱 YANARI MASATSUNA “Ringing House, Proper Rope”

- ⁸ 人払いをお願いした HITO BARAI WO ONEGAI SHITA asked for people to be “swept away”
- ⁹ 家臣 KASHIN “House attendant” vassal ¹⁰ 護衛兵 GO’EI HEI escort soldier
- ¹¹ 一心同体 ISSHIN DŌTAI “single heart, same body”
- ¹² 内心 NAISHIN “inner heart”
- ¹³ 耄碌した MŌROKU SHITA entered his dotage ¹⁴ 値踏み NEBUMI determine value (of a person) ¹⁵ とやら TOYARA marks skepticism of the value or merit of a person or thing ¹⁶ 知名度 CHIMEIDO degree to which one is known ¹⁷ 跳ね上がった HANE AGATTA leapt up
- ¹⁸ 自由過ぎ JIYŪSUGI too free
- ¹⁹ 憑依された HYŌI SARETA possessed by
- ²⁰ 錬金術師 RENKINJUTSUSHI practitioner of the speculated ability to draw gold from other substances ²¹ 魔術師 MAJUTSUSHI practitioner of magic ²² 羽毛 UMŌ “wing feathers”
- ²³ 教導的 KYŌDŌTEKI instructive
- ²⁴ 解毒 GEDOKU “untangle poison”
- ²⁵ 指揮 SHIKI command military overtones ²⁶ おくびにも出さず OKUBI NI MO DASAZU not even burping ²⁷ いたずらに ITAZURA NI mischievously
- ²⁸ 世直し YONAOSHI “fixing the world”
- ²⁹ にんまり NINMARI onomatopoeia for an exaggerated grin ³⁰ 器の大きさ UTSUWA NO ŌKISA “largeness of vessel”

³¹ 人の上に立つ HITO NO UE NI TATSU “stand on top of people” lead a group ³² さすが SASUGA as to be expected (from someone as capable) ³³ 歴史の破壊活動 REKISHI NO HAKAI KATSUDŌ “historical sabotage” vs. 破壊活動防止法 HAKAI KATSUDŌ BŌSHIHŌ Subversive Activities Prevention Act law introduced in 1952 to suppress perceived threats of domestic terrorism ³⁴ 歴史の修正者 REKISHI NO SHŪSEI SHA amender of history vs. 歴史修正主義者 REKISHI SHŪSEI SHUGISHA historical revisionist (主義 SHUGI ism) ³⁵ 平和主義者 HEIWA SHUGISHA advocate of peace doctrinaire overtones ³⁶ 権力者 KENRYOKU SHA individual invested with (usu. political) power ³⁷ 煮え湯を吞まされている NIE YU WO NOMASARETE IRU made to swallow scalding water ³⁸ 幸運な偶然 KŌ’UN NA GŪZEN “fortuitous coincidence”

³⁹ 意味合い IMI AI nuance

⁴⁰ 有史上 YŪSHIJŌ as far back as we have history ⁴¹ 取り憑かれた TORI TSUKARETA taken over, possessed by ⁴² 凋落して CHŌRAKU SHITE withered away ⁴³ 気遣ってもいられない KIZUKATTE MO IRARENAI cannot be minding his feelings ⁴⁴ 敗北 HAIBOKU defeat

⁴⁵ 経過の段階 KEIKA NO DANKAI “passage stage” work in progress ⁴⁶ 予言 YOGEN a calque of “prediction” 予 YO pre- (before) 言 GEN -dict (say) ⁴⁷ 日本刀作り NIHONTŌ ZUKURI (the tenets of) making Japanese swords ⁴⁸ 部下 BUKA subordinate; those below you in an institutional department ⁴⁹ 蹂躪される JŪRIN SARERU stepped on and trampled down ⁵⁰ 潜む HISOMU lurk

CHAPTER THREE

BESIEGING THE CASTLE









Without needless embellishment, what follows is the report Emonzaemon Soda delivered to the keep.

As previously stated, the defenses of Owari Castle were extraordinarily robust.

The castle gates were gigantic and substantial,¹ so much so that a charging army would have no easy time battering them down. Gatekeepers² wielding pikes flanked every entrance, although their role was symbolic at best.

But at the main gate, securest of them all—

This man showed up out of nowhere.

A tall man.

Muscular and fit.

Hair tousled—clad waist down in a hakama.

Bare-chested—but dressed in what appeared to be women's kimonos, a couple dozen layers of brash and brilliant finery.

Fists clenched at his sides.

No weapons on his person.

A sword—he carried not.

At first—the gatekeepers never suspected a man such as this of being an *intruder*. They figured him to be the sort of self-styled dandy³ who fills the streets of the Capital, if not so much Owari—in fact, he waltzed across the bridge over the moat up to the gate so nonchalantly that they almost failed to pay him any mind.

Once the man finally reached the gate, however, the gatekeepers turned their pikes on him.

“Who goes there—”

Spouting a stock line.⁴

Before they knew it—their pikes were riven, and their bodies flying skyward. One fell to the bottom of the moat—while the other chanced to flop over the parapet of the bridge.

Unclear as to what had happened to them.

Though something clearly happened.

Even still—despite things having gone this far, the gatekeepers doubted the man could make it through the castle walls.

The gatekeepers were symbolic.

Strictly a formality.

Breaking through the main gate of Owari Castle was thought to be impossible, and all the more so for a man working on his own—and yet.

The man took his position before the castle gate.

Bent deep at the knees, to lower his enormous body—he twisted his torso to the extreme, feet facing to the side, assuming his form.

And from this form—

“Fatal Orchid Four: Ryuryoku Kako.”

Thus.

In such a manner, his fist exploded—on the center of the gate.

It was unclear what he had done.

Though clearly—he had done something.

The gate itself fared as the gatekeepers predicted, entirely unscathed, except it opened with a modest creak⁵—swinging slowly inward.

It became clear after the fact—that somehow, the bar⁶ locking the gate from within had snapped. Almost as if the impact of the blow had traveled undiminished through the gate, shearing the bar that held it shut—

“Phew.”

Following this wild display—

Slowly, the man—stood himself up.

Lethargically.

Dejectedly.

And in a voice—laden with anguish.

He said these words:

“I’m sorry, Togame—but I don’t think I can follow your order anymore.”

“B-But how!”

Hearing this report from Emonzaemon Soda—Masatsuna Yanari, Eighth Shogun of the Owari Bakufu, was thrown into an utter frenzy.

“What on earth—is going on here!”

Perhaps this news had triggered memories.

Could be the shogun was remembering what happened twenty years before—when the Kaoyaku of Oshu, Takahito Hida, bared his fangs at the bakufu.

Painful memories—to be sure.

The sort of painful memories you wish in vain you could forget.

—*Nah.*

—*This is worse.*

“As you have heard, Your Excellency, a troublemaker—has barged into Owari Castle. Ten or more of the sentries have witnessed him—but have yet to apprehend⁷ him. Since they have fallen themselves in the process—we appear to have lost sight of him.”

“B-But how could that be! Overtaken by a sole raider?”⁸

“However solo, he is not to be discounted—for he is the valiant⁹ who was physically responsible for capturing eleven of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.”

“On—his own!”

Judging from the reaction Masatsuna registered when the Princess touched

upon Rinne Higaki, the shogun had, at best, skimmed the report submitted by the Schemer—but it had surely been delivered to the court.

This sole intruder was much more than a name you think you've heard before.

His exploits—were surely in the purview of the shogun.

Komori Maniwa, one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

Ginkaku Uneri, descendant of the man who felled ten thousand men.

Meisai Tsuruga, Mistress of Triad Shrine and keeper of the Sentoryu.

Hakuhei Sabi, that wunderkind of swordplay, and Strongest in Japan.

Kanara Azekura, captain of a ship of pirates, a scourge upon the land.

Konayuki Itezora, child of a clan claiming outrageous, monstrous strength.

Nanami Yasuri, the Genius.

Skytron, queen of the trash heap of Lake Fuyo.

Zanki Kiguchi, wielder of the righteous sword that giveth life.

Rinne Higaki, the hermit magus whose form changed with the company.

And Hohoh Maniwa—one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

The man captured the swords—of every single one of them.

Besides—after all.

Masatsuna surely needed no reminder of the fearsome nature of the Kyotoryu.

Not when the late Mutsue Yasuri—hailed the Hero of the Rebellion, had basically saved the life of Masatsuna Yanari—

–Oh well.

–He must have forgotten that little detail.

While he may have saved the shogun's life, he was but a lowly soldier¹⁰ to His Excellency—one of his subjects.¹¹

“B-But do you realize how many sentries there are inside Owari Castle—must be over a thousand! You mean to say the Kyotoryu will blow through every last one of them?”

“I do.” This voice speaking was not Princess Negative, but Emonzaemon Soda, from behind the ceiling. “Sorry to say—but even trillions¹² could not stop the Kyotoryu.”

“That might be going too far, Emonzaemon,” said Princess Negative, calling out¹³ this hyperbolic comment from her confidant, without actually disagreeing. “But you have the right idea. One thousand or even ten thousand men would make no difference, Your Excellency—because there is only one of him.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“Though I have zero intention to disparage the sentries—it must be noted that they fight primarily as a group. Trouble is—a group has a surprisingly hard time fending off an individual.”

“...”

“One can take on several. And of course groups can fight each other. Either scenario can be handled quite easily, so long as you brace yourself, or assume the proper attitude—but when a group attempts to fight an individual, they bite off more than they can chew.”

The way Princess Negative sounded.

You might think she admired the intruder.

“An intruder on his own—is our worst-case scenario.”

That said.

The fact that this intruder was the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu—made matters worse.

—Ah yes, that reminds me—twenty years ago, Mutsue Yasuri besieged a castle too.

Hida Castle and Owari Castle may be entirely different in scale.

Even so—as they say, blood will out.¹⁴

“Wh-What—what the hell! Why would the Kyotoryu besiege my castle! Is not the Kyotoryu—a member of your staff?”

“The only person in this world on my staff is Lieutenant Emonzaemon Soda. Besides, Shichika Yasuri worked directly under the Schemer.”

“S-Schemer—call for the Schemer at once! Tell her to order the Kyotoryu to stop!”

“I regret to inform you—that the Schemer died on the way back from the Sword Hunt.”

“What?!”

“Oh, did I not mention that?” Princess Negative tittered—playing dumb. “Well, it would seem the boy has gone berserk—after losing his master. All the same, Your Excellency. While this may be a worst-case scenario for us, it could also be said to be fortuitous.”

“Wh-Why is that?”

“Because the Kyotoryu is the ultimate key to fulfilling our dream, the grand design set forth by Kiki Shikizaki. He is the magnum opus.”

“M-Magnum—opus?”

Masatsuna sounded puzzled by this unexpected phrase.

Princess Negative continued, unperturbed.

“Yes. Though the particulars are not what we expected—the circumstances are exactly what we hoped for all along.”

“...”

“That this sort of thing would happen, once the thousand Mutant Blades had been amassed—was prophesied by Kiki Shikizaki, Your Excellency. And if things proceed accordingly—the Yanari Shogunate’s reign will be secured. Guaranteeing—a thousand years¹⁵ of prosperity.”

Princess Negative made this last part sound like an incidental detail—but her comment seemed to be more than enough to restore Masatsuna’s composure.

How so greedy.

Also, plain and simple.

Nice—and gullible.

“S-So—all we need to do is strike back against the Kyotoryu. A-And for reasons beyond me, doing so will bring this design of yours to fruition?”

“Yes. And in that sense, one might say it was inevitable that the Kyotoryu would turn traitor¹⁶ at this stage of the game.”

As daughter of Takahito Hida, the Schemer’s fate was sealed, but Princess

Negative allowed for Emonzaemon to use his own best judgment¹⁷ when it came to how to handle Shichika Yasuri.

Ordering him to kill the Kyotoryu only if he posed a threat.

As it turned out, Emonzaemon executed the Schemer using Ento the Bead, before Shichika had the chance to intervene—in which case.

—It's almost like you saw all of this coming.

—Was that—your ninja abilities shining through?

Princess Negative wondered.

Though she may as well grill¹⁸ him on this later.

There were more pressing matters at hand.

“Your Excellency—I’m afraid we cannot simply strike back and be done with it. First we must undergo a rather troublesome and obstreperous procedure.”

“Wh-What are you saying?”

“Allow me—to explain.”

Right.

This was her chance to use their unwanted presence—to her advantage.

“Although I may be the descendant of Kiki Shikizaki, I honestly don’t put much stock in fate or the like...but at this point, I have to admit I feel a kind of power in the room.”

“Hm?”

“The eleven guards, with whom Your Excellency’s heart beats as one, combined with my own confidant, Emonzaemon Soda, for twelve—will put the finishing touches on this history.”



“—Whew.”

Princess Negative’s conjecture hit the bullseye.¹⁹

In his brazen attempt to besiege Owari Castle from the main gate, on his own, Shichika Yasuri, the Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu—drubbed out the sentries within the castle walls by virtue of the fact he was alone.

The sentries, one thousand strong.

And yet, the interior of Owari Castle was mind-bogglingly expansive.

Places to hide galore.

The sentries never dreamt that a lone troublemaker would invade the castle from the main gate. Their ranks held no small number of musketeers—but they could serve no purpose if they could not find their mark.²⁰

Still, the sentries must have been flummoxed.

How could a man his size be so impossible to find?

How could they fail to find this man who waltzed around like some kind of a dandy, in the gaudy costume of a woman?

He stood out like a sore thumb.

His appearance so memorable it would be seared into your memory after a single glance—so how could he be so difficult to locate?

Strange in a way that defied explanation.

And yet—such was the fighting style Shichika had acquired over the past year.

The island monkey who was once content with lunging like a wild boar—had focused his style not on fighting, but on winning.

Thus far, Shichika had visited Owari twice.

The first time in the eighth moon, the second in the tenth.

However, on both occasions, Togame the Schemer had visited the castle on her own, leaving Shichika to bide his time at Schemer Mansion.

As a result—Shichika had not seen for himself how the castle was constructed. Though even if he had, its intricate and fantastic structure would likely have been too much for him to comprehend.

As demonstrated by their unguided traversal of Japan—as well as by their rumble in the rubble of Lake Fuyo against Skytron, Togame had a knack for drawing maps.

At some point along the way.

For whatever reason—though probably knowing it would come in handy once the Sword Hunt was complete, Togame had drawn Shichika a map of Owari Castle to explain how it was built.

Including both plane and stereoscopic²¹ figures.

Unlike Togame, of course, Shichika had an unreliable²² memory—and had not memorized the details of the sketches that she had drawn him.

Nevertheless, this had been more than plenty—allowing him to nimbly fight his way around the castle.

For security purposes, the sentries had only been familiarized with their own

posts²³—but Shichika maneuvered freely, up and down and all around the castle.

Brushing off a sentry here.

Resting in the shadows there.

Shichika fought—onward and upward.

Who knows how things would have gone before Shichika Yasuri gained experience in battle, but after a year of solid experience, not even these select soldiers could hold a candle to him.

“Phew—whew, whew.”

He caught—his breath.

The above aside, besieging a castle on your own was ill-advised. At the moment, Shichika was hiding in the shadows—crouching low and taking a slightly longer rest.

In all that brash and brilliant finery.

Seemingly two dozen layers of gaudy robes.

Wrapping his body in Togame’s clothes—

Taking a breather.

“Whew.”

—When Dad besieged the castle.

—Some friends of his were there, if only just a few.

“Including the sentries, this place supposedly has what—twelve hundred soldiers? Wonder how many I’ve taken out...at least a hundred... I can probably handle fifty more.”

Shichika stood.

When was that?

Ah yes, barely three months into the journey—at Triad Shrine in Izumo.

Home to the thousand miko.

If Togame had failed in her negotiations, he would have had to fight all thousand of them himself—Shichika remembered what it felt like at that stage.

—For Togame, I would have fought a thousand people or however many more.

—But now, I'm not so sure I can go on.

—Because now—

She wasn't here for him to fight for.

"...Oops!"

Sensing something behind him—Shichika spun gracefully around. He must have been pretty tired to allow someone to get this close—or so he thought, but he was off.

Before him was a single crow.

Black as lacquerware.

Yikes, thought Shichika, regaining his composure—

"Kyotoryu."

But then.

When he heard the crow address him—he instantly braced himself.

"Was that you? Since when can crows talk? Wait."

This can't be happening, he thought.

Crows don't talk—but if this one is...

"Unbelievable."

Ignoring what Shichika had asked—the crow continued:

*"You made it—is what I'd like to say, but since I don't believe my eyes, I can't bring myself to say it. After I let you go and spared your life—you turn around and throw it away. The Schemer would be spinning in her grave."*²⁴

"E-Emonzaemon?"

The voice was wrong—but this manner of speaking was unquestionably Emonzaemon Soda.

*"Aioi Ninpo—Vocal Craft."*²⁵ *As elementary a piece of ninpo as it gets..."*

Quoth the crow.

*"But who cares about all that. Kyotoryu—we've called off the ordinary soldiers."*²⁶ *No need to keep on fighting for no reason."*

"Huh?"

"Quit hopping around the castle. Go straight up to the keep. Her Highness and I—will be waiting for you."

"Waiting? For what..."

"I assume you're here to kill the Schemer's nemesis? As you proceed, a fair number of extraordinary soldiers will be standing in your way—but Her Highness and I expect you to blow through the likes of them without hardship. Although I don't suppose that this will be the pleasure of His Excellency—"

With that—straight off.

The crow took flight.

Shichika figured that he could have caught him if he tried, but realized that it would have been counterproductive. After spending so much time facing off against the Maniwa, he could venture a guess as to what the Vocal Craft was all about.

He reckoned that exactly as he said—Emonzaemon Soda was up in the castle keep.

Waiting there for Shichika.

Together with Princess Negative.

Her confidant wasn't wrong about him having fended off the ordinary soldiers.

"He is wrong, though..."

Shichika—stepping from the shadows and stretching out his back, as if to limber up a bit before proceeding—fluttering²⁷ the sleeves of his flamboyant finery.

Lethargically.

Dejectedly.

Muttered to himself.

"I didn't come here to kill Togame's nemesis—I came here to die."

Then—like second nature, he mouthed the words his former owner had forbidden him.

This, too, so long ago now. When was that?

"Ah, what a pain."

¹ 重厚 JŪKŌ “thick and dense”

² 門兵 MONPEI “gate soldiers”

³ かぶき者気取り KABUKIMONO KIDORI someone who affects being different ⁴ お決まりの文句 OKIMARI NO MONKU set phrase ⁵ ぎい GIIH onomatopoeia for a tense sound, suggesting rotation under weight ⁶ 門 KAN’NUKI bolt (of a door) ⁷ 捕獲 HOKAKU “hunt and capture” used with both animals and people ⁸ 賊 ZOKU bandit vs. 海賊 KAIZOKU pirates ⁹ 精鋭 SEI’EI “sharp spirit” elite ¹⁰ 一兵卒 IPPEI SOTSU common soldier ¹¹ 下々 SHIMO JIMO “the (people) beneath” hoi polloi ¹² 兆 CHŌ 1,000,000,000,000 (one million million) ¹³ 窘めて TASHINAMETE chiding ¹⁴ 血は争えない CHI WA ARASOENAI “blood cannot be contested”

¹⁵ 千年 SEN’NEN “millennium” symbolic number, evokes endlessness ¹⁶ 謀反を起こした MUHON WO OKOSHITA mounted an insurrection ¹⁷ 裁量 SAIRYŌ discretion ¹⁸ 問い詰める TOI TSUMERU “question and corner”

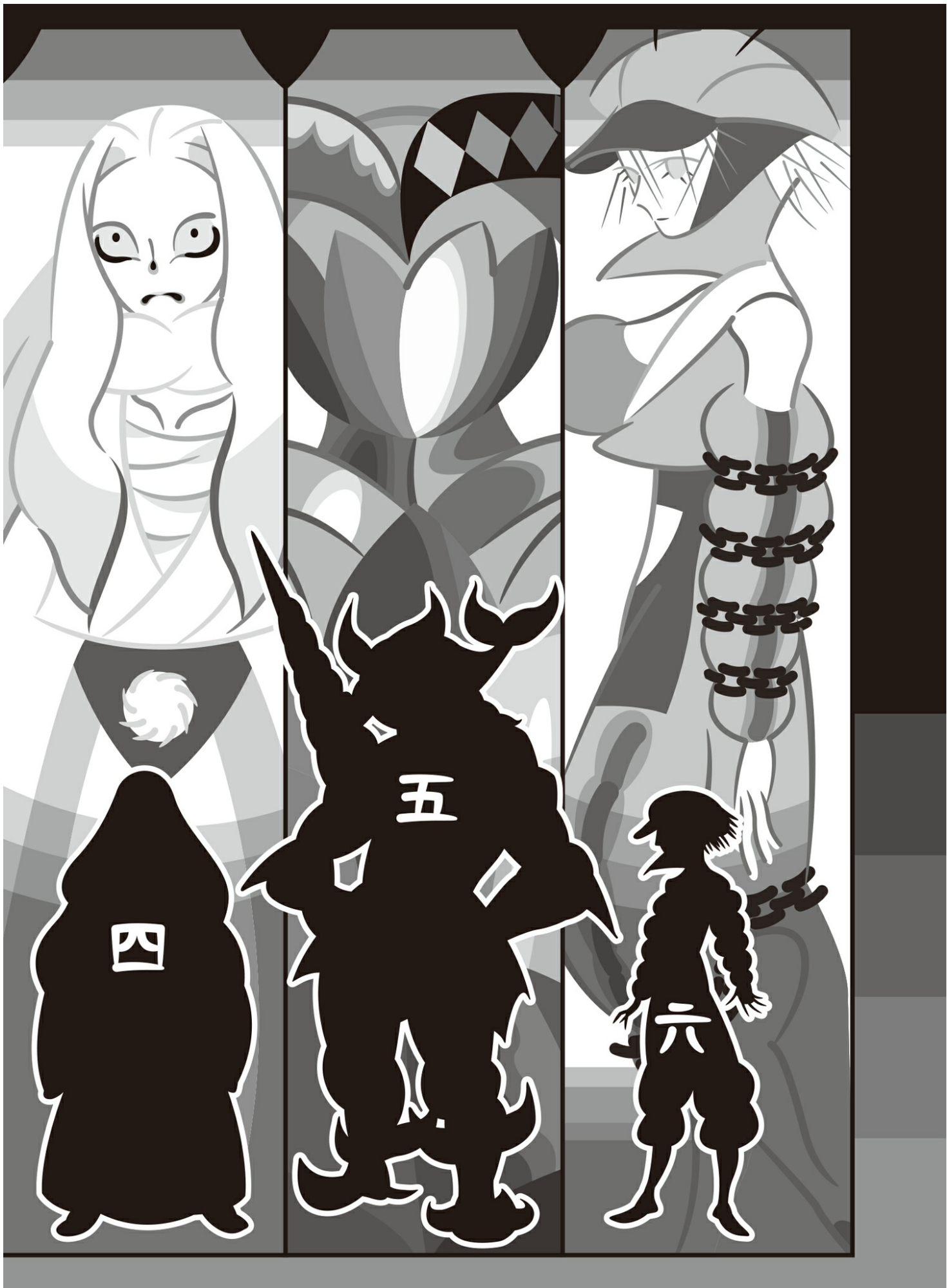
¹⁹ 的 MATO (archery) target ²⁰ 標的 HYŌTEKI (military) target ²¹ 平面図 立体図 HEIMENZU RITTAIZU two-dimensional vs. three-dimensional diagram ²² あやふや AYAFUYA unsound, unsteady ²³ 持ち場 MOCHIBA “held place” station ²⁴ 草葉の陰で悲しんで KUSABA NO KAGE DE KANASHINDE “lamenting in the dark, under the grass”

²⁵ 声帯移し SEITAI UTSUSHI “vocal cord transfer” vs. 声帯模写 SEITAI MOSHA vocal mimicry ²⁶ 一般兵 IPPAN HEI regular troops ²⁷ 翻して HIRUGAESHITE flipping up vs. 翻訳 HONYAKU “turned-over sense” translation

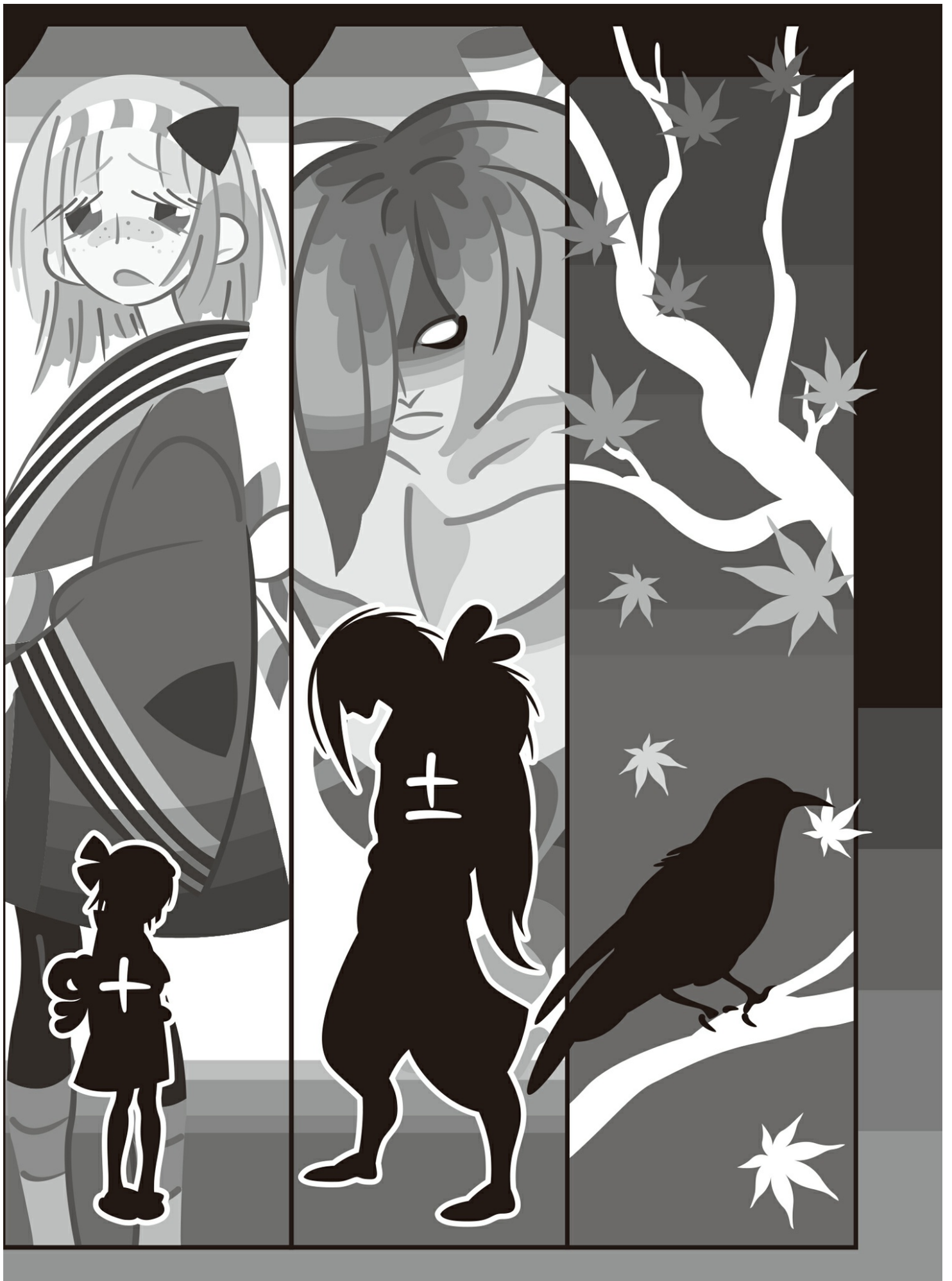
CHAPTER FOUR

THE ELEVEN
GUARDIANS
OF THE
YANARI
SHOGUNATE











In the first room on the way to the keep.

There stood a man—baring Zetto the Leveler.

But then again—Zetto the Leveler had no sheath, and thus was always bare.

A katana boasting absolute hardness, impossible to bend or break.

Owned of late by Komori Maniwa “The Hell-Made,” one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

The first owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Hanyamaru,¹ one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Gaze uncomfortably keen—bangs swept messily across his forehead, the man thus gave his introduction and pointed the tip of the Leveler at Shichika.

“...”

Shichika eyed the tip of the sword a little wistfully—and responded to the man who called himself Hanyamaru.

“So far, I’ve been comfortable with going easy on you guys—and haven’t had to kill a single soldier, but from here on out, I won’t be holding back. I don’t know how strong you are, and I don’t really care—but as long as you’re using one of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki, I’m gonna have to go all out.”

“I’d say you’re still a little too comfortable,” Hanyamaru replied—smirking like he was the comfortable one. “I know the story—Kyotoryu. While I can’t speak to the other swords, it would be wrong to say the best sword won with this one. For the most part, your adversary Komori Maniwa brought about his own demise, letting you win by default—I’m afraid you don’t have what it takes to bend or break or even scratch this blade. Care to disagree?”

“...”

“I’m not sure what His Excellency is thinking, much less that dubious Princess Negative character—but their decision to call off the soldiers was correct. Know why? *Because I don’t need any help to crush a goon like you!*”

Issuing this battle cry—Hanyamaru lunged at Shichika without further ado.

The room was not so big.

Affording him no opportunity for escape or evasion.

“Side Splitter!”

Faced with the furiously thrusting blade—Shichika deployed the same Kyotoryu move as the last time that he fended off the Leveler.

“Kyotoryu—Kiku.”

In this move, he used his spine for a fulcrum, catching the katana in a proverbial armlock—every aspect of his delivery the same as against Komori Maniwa.

But this time.

Zetto the Leveler pealed² like a bell—and cracked in two.

As if the hefty blade—were a dead branch.

Snapping with a satisfying crack.

“Huh...huh?”

Hanyamaru looked astonished.

To which Shichika responded casually.

“In the wrong hands, even the greatest sword is just a hunk of metal—I’ll have to take back what I said. The swords of Kiki Shikizaki aren’t the least bit scary,³ when your enemy can’t handle them correctly.”

“...nkk!”

“Sorry—but I still won’t be going easy on you.”

Playing off the Kiku, Shichika segued into his next move—mercilessly deploying the Last Fatal Orchid of the Kyotoryu—Shichika Hachiretsu Redux.

Hanyamaru was powerless to stop him.

Of course—the fact that the Kiku was not merely meant for breaking swords, but was devised by the school’s founder Kazune Yasuri, working in concert with Kiki Shikizaki, *specifically for breaking Zetto the Leveler*, the hardest sword in all the land—and the fact that Shichika had only been unable to break Zetto the Leveler on Haphazard Island because his battle experience was nil, and his skills too green, were more than he could hope to understand.

“—One sword down.”



In the second room on the way to the keep.

There stood a man—wearing Zanto the Razor on his hip.

The keenest sword in all the land, able to cut through any extant substance in a single swing.

Owned of late by Ginkaku Uneri, the Lord of Gekoku Castle, a master of iainuki.

The second owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Furachi Oniyadori,⁴ one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Head shaved⁵ and cheeks bewhiskered, this man dressed like a monk offered his introduction—then crouched low, set his right hand upon the grip of his katana, and prepared himself to draw.

“Zanto the Razor, huh,” Shichika muttered—not looking at the face of the man who called himself Furachi Oniyadori, but at the sword, and spoke as if transfixed. “I fought this sword back when I could think of nothing except fighting—come to mention it, I never actually set eyes on its blade.”

“Nor will you ever,” Furachi told him—quietly.

Eyes closed.

As if in reference to the Danger Zone of Ginkaku Uneri—he took position in the center of the room, stock-still.

Definitely not making the first move.

That said, because the room was relatively large, Furachi would have had a hard time making the whole thing a Danger Zone—and at the same time, since the ceilings were so tall, Shichika had no hope of using Fatal Orchid Seven,

Rakka Rozeki, like when he offed Ginkaku Uneri.

Although—this was not Shichika’s intention anyway.

Normally, as normal as can be—he ambled toward Furachi Oniyadori.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Furachi said. “Before you came here, I killed five others with this very sword. Do you ken my meaning?”

Then noticing that Shichika had stepped into his range.

He drew the sword in the space of a breath—

“This means the time is ripe for Bloodlust—my sword outstrips the speed of sound!”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. I knew already.”

Shichika made this annoyed comment—only after catching the drawn sword barehanded.

“Huh...what?!”

“This sword might cut through anything, but its sides don’t cut at all—you know, when people think of mutodori, the first thing they imagine is a guy dramatically catching a sword midair, but what I just did doesn’t even have a name in the Kyotoryu. It’s too basic to deserve a term—just like your iainuki, too minor⁶ to spend time on.”

“A...Agh.”

“Still, since one false move with this sword could result in fatal injury—I can’t take any chances. Sorry—but I won’t be going easy on you either—”

With that—he unleashed Fatal Orchid Three: Hyakka Ryoran.

Deployable even when both hands are otherwise engaged with a sword—this

Fatal Orchid beat the living daylights out of Furachi Oniyadori.

After glancing at his prostrate body, Shichika gave Zanto the Razor a long, hard look—but neither its temper line nor any other detail meant anything to him.

Hence.

“Not what I was expecting. *Looks like a normal sword,*” he said dismissively, then snapped the blade in two.

Shearing through the sword designed to shear through anything.

He left the pieces on the floor, like they were worthless rubbish—and proceeded to the next chamber.

“—Two swords down.”



In the third room on the way to the keep.

There stood a woman—armed with Sento the Legion.

Holding a piece of the Legion in each hand.

The remaining nine hundred and ninety-eight pieces—had been stabbed into the floor, into the walls, and into the ceiling of the room—filling it so completely that it almost made you woozy.

The grandness of the hall allowed for such a battle array⁷ to be achieved

indoors.

Endless replacements at the ready, epitomizing disposability—the thousand swords.

Owned of late by Meisai Tsuruga, Mistress of Triad Shrine and keeper of the Sentoryu.

The third owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Akatsuki Tomoe⁸—one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Wearing an eyepatch⁹ on one eye, she gave her name—and raised both swords.

Mildly dismayed, Shichika scanned all thousand of the swords that studded almost every surface of the hall and heaved a sigh. “Togame’s reports weren’t just a bunch of lies, I guess...but that’s neither here nor there¹⁰—monkey around all you want, but it isn’t going to work on me.”

“Is that so?” Tomoe snickered at Shichika. “Do you even know the origins of the Sentoryu that Meisai Tsuruga used?”

“No, at least not any of the details.”

“It’s quite the venerable school of swordplay—not exactly famous, but also not without practitioners.”

“What’s your point?”

“I too—can *use* the Sentoryu.”

As she spoke—Tomoe inched towards him.

Closing the distance nonchalantly.

“Point being! I was born to wield Sento the Legion—but that’s not all!”

Howling now, Tomoe fired a sword at Shichika.

Seeing him dodge her attack, Tomoe drew one of the swords thrust into the tatami, so as to arm herself with two again—and hurried after Shichika.

“This isn’t some knockoff¹¹ Thousand Sword Odyssey, it’s the real deal!”

“What of it?”

After dodging the projectile sword—Shichika had not bounced back from the dodge, but rather threw his whole weight into a spin—then, as if threading the needle between the two swinging swords, he planted a backfist into Tomoe’s chest.

“Ugh...”

When Tomoe groaned—Shichika doubled down.

“What made Meisai so difficult for me—why fighting her was such a struggle, was her devious personality. She had absolutely no qualms whatsoever about playing tricks on me. Now that I have some distance from it, I realize that all those swords were not the issue.”

“...nkk.”

Obviously.

Shichika doubled down with more than words.

Ending the match with Fatal Orchid One, Kyoka Suigetsu, the fastest move in all the Kyotoryu, the same move he had used to kill Meisai Tsuruga—perhaps Shichika’s attempt at a tribute to her.

In the process—the swords Tomoe had been holding clashed against each other, the result of which was that a huge crack formed in one of them.

“This sword may come with almost limitless replacements—but once even one of the thousand swords is lost,” Shichika muttered, “there isn’t any going back.”¹²

He looked at the crack in the sword.

“—Three swords down.”



In the fourth room on the way to the keep.

There stood a man—armed with Hakuto the Whisper.

The blade so whisper-thin you could see through it.

A sword as fine as glasswork—to the point where it was hard to catch.

So light.

So fragile.

Hakuto the Whisper.

Owned of late by the young man who enjoyed a reputation as the Strongest in Japan and as the Sword Saint—Hakuhei Sabi.

The fourth owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Matsuaki Fugi¹³—one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

His head of hair swept back, he gave his name—and steadied his sword,

holding it low.

“I really need to thank you, Kyotoryu,” said Fugi. “Hakuhei Sabi, who you waylaid on Ganryu Island—was my archrival.¹⁴ We helped each other hone our skills. Not exactly a friend of mine, but we worked together a fair amount when he was in the bakufu.”

“...”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not out for vengeance—but by taking down the man who took down Sabi, I can finally leave Sabi in the dust.”

“This again,” said Shichika. “In the past year, twenty other guys have given me the same speech and challenged me to a duel—I’ve forgotten all their names, but I’ll remember yours. Fugi, right?”

“Bah—rubbish!”

Fugi ended the conversation—and ran full bore at Shichika.

His speed alarming.

Which made sense—since his absurdly light sword had no weight to it.

This was the maneuver that Shichika had seen on Ganryu Island—seen, or been shown, though was unable to view in its totality—Hakuhei Sabi’s Imploding Earth!

“Whisper Eureka!”

That falling sword promised to slice Shichika’s head asunder—but instead.

It glanced off Shichika’s forehead.

And Hakuto the Whisper—turned to dust.

“Huh...why?”

“That sword is so fragile that unless you swing it in a perfect arc, without veering even slightly, the blade will go to pieces—although, since after all, you are the archrival of Sabi, it seems that didn’t pose you any trouble.”

Taking his time—to the point where he was almost hanging loose, Shichika moved into Kyotoryu Form Two, the Suisen.

“But if I adjust the angle of my body—the power of Hakuto the Whisper is gone.”

This was not Shichika’s discovery, but a scheme that Togame had hatched two seconds after seeing Hakuto the Whisper in real life.¹⁵

Though using such a tactic would have made the sword impossible to capture, and probably wouldn’t have worked on the Sword Saint in the first place.

“You don’t spark joy. Goodbye.”

With that—Shichika laid into Fugi with Fatal Orchid Two, Kacho Fugetsu.¹⁶

“—Four swords down.”



In the fifth room on the way to the keep.

There stood a man—donning Zokuto the Armor.

Full metal jacket, thick and gleaming—Western plate mail, outfitted head to toe with blades. If Shichika was giant, then the Armor was gigantic.¹⁷ A suit of

armor—but a sword.

Owned of late by Kanara Azekura, Captain of the Armored Pirates, headquartered in Dakuon Harbor in Satsuma.

The fifth owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Kairo Iga,¹⁸ one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Sealed inside that suit of armor, the man stated his name—then leaned toward Shichika, prepared to charge.

The sight of this—spooked even Shichika.

“I had no idea that there was someone besides Azekura who could wear the Armor.”

Kanara Azekura was a big man, standing over seven feet tall. How could anyone else be that big, much less a member of the bakufu? Togame had failed to mention anyone like him.

“Hahaha,” Kairo chortled. “There certainly isn’t—doesn’t my name explain things? I’m using ninpo, to make it fit me.”

“Iga? Oh, that Iga—”

Evidently—this guy was a former ninja, just like Emonzaemon Soda.

Shichika was unable to say for sure.

However—what he knew for sure was how this guy had put on Zokuto the Armor.

“Thanks to my Iga Ninpo—Muscle Mania.”¹⁹

“A way of puffing up your body. Sorta reminds me of the ninpo that Komori used—but at this point, I can’t exactly say I’m mystified.”

“Well, I’m not exactly trying to mystify you—though incidentally, I did read the reports. Well then, Kyotoryu—I hear your Fatal Orchids don’t work against this Armor?”

“...”

“I won’t make the same mistake as your pal Kanara Azekura and expect the Armor to save my life—before you can get ahold of me, I’ll blow a hole right through you!”

However.

This time—Shichika made the first move.

While Kairo continued his tiresome²⁰ palavering,²¹ Shichika used the footwork of Form Seven, the Kakitsubata—to close the distance between him and Kairo in a flash.

“!”

When Kairo noticed, it was already too late.

Shichika had swept him off his feet.

“Puffing up your body doesn’t change your weight though, right? In that case, unlike Azekura, it’s a breeze to knock you down—”

“Wah!”

“And another thing...you think Togame just forgot about that? Think she saw a sword one of my Fatal Orchids didn’t work on—and just let it go? Well guess what, I have a pretty good idea by now of why Ryuryoku Kako didn’t work before.”

That detail probably wasn’t mentioned in the report.

While Kairo was still tumbling through the air, yet to land on the

tatami—Shichika slammed him with the same move that he used to bust the bar of the main gate in entering Owari Castle. The move that sends its fury across barriers—Fatal Orchid Four, Ryuryoku Kako.

“Basically, Zokuto the Armor sheds the impact—when it gets hit, the shock is radiated outward from the sword, rather than through. Which is why—when you’re midair, and no part of the Armor is making contact with the ground or walls or anything, the impact has nowhere to go—and *explodes* inside the Armor.”

Which is exactly—what happened next.

Between losing his footing and hitting the tatami.

In that exact instant—the joints and seams of the Armor—spurted²² crimson blood.

“Am I right that once you’re in that thing, you can’t get out unless you open it from the inside? If so—Zokuto the Armor is as good as²³ busted.”

Shichika looked down upon a fallen, motionless Kairo—or at Zokuto the Armor, and headed onward to the next zone.

“—Five swords down.”



In the sixth room on the way to the keep.

There stood a man—holding Soto the Twin.

That inelegant sword of stone, so tremendously heavy it was difficult to transport—which, if dropped, would sink into the earth by virtue of its mass.²⁴

Owned of late by the sole survivor of the Itezora Clan, who once lived in Ezo atop Mt. Odori, a Level One Disaster Area—a girl by the name of Konayuki Itezora.

The sixth owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Bofura²⁵ Maniwa, one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Having given his name, this man in sleeveless ninja garb, whose whole body was wrapped with chains—turned the sword on Shichika and came forward.

“Holy mackerel!” Shichika could not hold back his admiration. “You’re not even some big guy like Kanara Azekura—how can you pick up that sword? That’s pretty unbelievable. Or even—inconceivable. Does this mean you’re one of the Itezoras?”

“You must be joking.” Bofura shook his head. “My roots are in the Maniwa Ninja Clan.”

“Hmm...”

He did give the name Maniwa.

First Iga—now Maniwa.

It would seem the bakufu was surprisingly well-connected with the ninja community.

“We’re talking over two hundred years ago, though, when my ancestor broke away²⁶ from the Maniwa Ninja Clan—and pledged exclusive loyalty to the

current shogunate.”

“Backstabbing the backstabbers, huh. Did those moneygrubbing Maniwa rub you the wrong way?”

“Hard to say, since after all, it was my ancestor who betrayed them—what I will say, though, is that you’re setting yourself up for trouble if you’re expecting me to be as amateurish as the Maniwa Bosses you’ve taken down.”

“You must be using Maniwa Ninpo. How else could you whip around Soto the Twin—like it was lighter than air.”

“Sure am—Harlequin Butterfly.”

“...”

Oh, Shichika remembered, that move sis was using.

Oh, wait, that means—

“Regrettably, this means I’ll wind up settling their score²⁷ with you—I suppose that’s the way things have come to pass!”

The heaviest sword in all the land, Soto the Twin.

Bofura brandished it—as if it were its polar opposite, Hakuto the Whisper. When he had closed the distance, he tossed it to the other hand—

“Houndstooth!”

He tried striking Shichika over the head—but Shichika caught the sword like it was nothing special.

“Huh...what?”

“Harlequin Butterfly...eliminates the weight of things, right?” Shichika said. “But without weight, what good is this sword anyhow?”

For Soto the Twin—converted mass into offensive strength.

“D-Damn it all—”

“Look, I haven’t met all Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa—but in my experience, none of them were anywhere as weak as you.”

With that—Shichika wedged Soto the Twin between himself and Bofura and swatted his body with the heel of his hand.

Fatal Orchid One: Kyoka Suigetsu.

Destroying Soto the Twin, wedged between them, in the process.

Bereft of its weight, that sword was nothing but a flake of stone to Shichika.

“—Six swords down.”



In the seventh room on the way to the keep.

There stood a man—stabbed in the heart with Akuto the Eel.

Small as a dagger, it sent the lightning it was limitlessly charged with surging through his body, like some kind of an electrode, that he may never feel exhaustion or fatigue, making the man an invulnerable²⁸ warrior who could fight indefinitely.

Owned of late by Shichika’s older sister, Nanami Yasuri, Head of the House of Yasuri and a genius invested with every kind of talent.

The seventh owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Uron,²⁹ one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Wearing Western spectacles of an eccentric design, the man, whose veins were bulging from his skin, perhaps thanks to the effects of Akuto the Eel, thus introduced himself—and turned to Shichika, taking position in the style used in kenpo.

“I gather Akuto the Eel was last used by your sister—the sickly thing, but I’ll have you know its powers are far different in the hands of a healthy, first-rate warrior such as myself. Even that move of hers, Nanami the Heel, is manifest in an entirely different way through me. So much for your agenda³⁰—it makes no difference to me whether you’re the Kyotoryu or Shikizaki’s magnum opus, because this is where you die.”

“I’ll admit it’s gonna be a little tough to take you down,” Shichika responded. “Since I have no other choice—I’ll do my best impression of my sickly sister.”

“Huh?”

“You may be inexhaustible, and you may be invincible—”

As if to catch him unawares,³¹ Shichika broke off midsentence and darted forward—leaping to the right side of Uron.

Then.

“So maybe you won’t die after one fatal blow—but what about a couple hundred?”

“Whuh...”

“A medley of Kyotoryu strike moves—from the Hinageshi to the Jinchoge.”

Just as Nanami had once done to Shichika, in their battle at Seiryoin Gokenji

Temple—Shichika laid into Uron, pummeling his invincible body with two hundred and seventy-two strikes, unleashed at him from every direction.

Though unlike Nanami, Shichika was not able to use Harlequin Butterfly, and since he pulled none of his punches—each landed with incredible³² force.

As a result, Uron died two hundred and seventy-two times over.

At the very end—having expended all its lightning, bled dry, Akuto the Eel became a shell of itself, and slipped free from Uron’s heart.

“The wickedest sword in existence, huh—to be sure, that was a wicked way to die, closer to torture than anything I’ve ever seen.”

Shichika meant it as he said this to Uron’s dead body.³³

“—Seven swords down.”



In the eighth room on the way to the keep.

A woman awaited Shichika a short distance from Bito the Sundial—a.k.a. Skytron.

Bito the Sundial, a sword shaped like a doll—or like a human. An automated sword—engineered to operate its four arms and four legs almost indefinitely.

Owned of late by Skytron, the owner operator katana.³⁴

The eighth owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Oh Haiga,³⁵ one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Gorgeous hair spilling over her shoulders, the woman said her name—and edged over to Shichika, moving in step with Skytron.

“I’ll have you know that Skytron’s settings have been changed—unlike when you saw her at Lake Fuyo, she no longer poses the risk of killing any and all humans. Now this pretty doll of mine will only act as I command her to—and for your information, her sole directive at the moment is to kill you.”

“Oh, okay,” said Shichika.

It appeared this explanation from Haiga—only served to reassure him.

Haiga eyed him skeptically.

“You know, I personally had a complicated set of feelings about Skytron—which made me hesitant to turn her into scrap metal, but now that you’ve gone and fiddled with her head,” Shichika explained, “I’m no longer on the fence.”

Kind enough, so far as explanations go.

But its condescension infuriated Haiga.

“Kyotoryu, you do realize—this is two on one! Two on one, two on one, two on one! You could barely cope with four arms and legs—how do you expect to handle six!”

From the left and right—acting in unison, Haiga and Skytron came after Shichika.

Haiga armed in both hands with weapons that looked like talons.³⁶

And Skytron already lifting off from the tatami.

“BITO SUNDIAL”

Skytron had transformed into its ultimate form—

“ROBOSLAY—PAIN RAIN—”

“The Last Fatal Orchid of the Kyotoryu—Shichika Hachiretsu, Freestyle.”³⁷

In this move.

Shichika unleashed the Seven Fatal Orchids all at once, but to the left and right.

Hitting Skytron with the first four Fatal Orchids.

Reserving the last three for Oh Haiga.

“Gakk...!”

Skytron—burst apart from the torso, flew towards a plaster wall, while Haiga, landing on the wall opposite, met the same fate as Skytron.

“K-Kh...ukk.”

Hit with one less Fatal Orchid, Haiga suffered a comparatively lighter beating—though perhaps this was unlucky.

Although she was mortally wounded, she did not die instantly, but muttered to herself³⁸ in a voice fraught with blood.

“How...when it was two on one... I thought the first time you fought Skytron, you barely made it out alive...”

“Only because that time we were trying to catch Skytron...besides, this time,” Shichika said dismissively, “you got in the way, preventing Skytron from exhibiting her true potential.”

“...nkk.”

“That takes care of that.”

Nevertheless.

Shichika gave the wreck³⁹ of Skytron a rueful look—before leaving the room behind.

“—Eight swords down.”



In the ninth room on the way to the keep.

The man awaiting Shichika—had already raised Oto the Cured high in the air to fight.

A wooden sword of flowing woodgrain—a sword of wood that could not cut and would not withstand much abuse. And yet it had a power over the spirit of its owner. For this mysterious sword conditioned⁴⁰ the spirit of whoever owned it.

Owned of late by the Twelfth Master of the Heartland School, Zanki Kiguchi.

The ninth owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Kokubo Sumigaoka,⁴¹ one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Wearing a fierce expression, as if something had angered him, the man introduced himself without lowering Oto the Cured—and addressed Shichika.

“Kyotoryu—no, I think I’ll use your name. Shichika Yasuri.”

“ ... ”

“A fight like this is pointless. If you’re thinking of surrendering, I need not tease you any further.”

When Shichika declined to answer him—Sumigaoka continued.

“I believe they call this Shangri-Oto? The second I picked up this sword, I was overtaken by an awfully peaceful feeling. So peaceful that even I, infamous for being the most savage man⁴² in all Owari, feel inclined to look the other way and let you go—so how about it, Shichika Yasuri. Interested in cooperating?”

“Nope.”

“I see. In that case—I’ll take you down in one fell swoop!”

Sumigaoka aimed straight for his throat—colliding with Shichika. The tip of Oto the Cured glanced off his hair—but Shichika marvelously dodged the attack.

Then.

“Fatal Orchid Six—Kinjo Tenka!”

He unleashed this secret move without remorse—literally reducing Oto the Cured to smithereens.⁴³

“Hate to break it to you, but unlike Kiguchi, your words are all veneer, which I find totally unappealing. Yeah,” he said, “to be honest, you’re just irritating.”

Shichika landed the move, no looking back.

“I guess you can drain out the venom, but if there’s nothing there to fill its place, a hollow⁴⁴ person will be as hollow as ever. Good to know.”

Shichika stood himself up.

Noting his hair, which had been grazed.

“—Nine swords down.”



In the tenth room on the way to the keep.

There stood a woman who did not so much as turn around when Shichika came in, fixating instead on the hilt gripped in her hand—Seito the Garland.

A swordless sword, only a hilt and handguard—for of all the thousand Mutant Blades, which included no small number of unswordlike forms, this was the only sword that was no sword at all, lacking a blade of any kind.

Owned of late by Rinne Higaki, the hermit magus who had been alive over three centuries, and whose appearance changed depending on who looked.

The tenth owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Kosha Saraba,⁴⁵ one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Wearing a headband⁴⁶ and a loose coat⁴⁷ that made her look ready for action, she gave her name—and spoke without looking towards Shichika.

“Hey—what do you think I should do with this?” she asked. “What a miserable piece of junk... I mean, do you realize how I feel? Handed a weirdo⁴⁸ sword like this and told to run along and fight. Loyalty only goes so far.”

“...The last owner threw the fight, on the basis of self-awareness, then ran off.”

“I’m afraid that doesn’t help me any.”

“I guess you could try tossing it at me?”

“Although I’m a bit hesitant to take your advice...I have no other option, so I may as well give it a try.”

As instructed.

Saraba threw the hilt—tossing Seito the Garland at Shichika.

Shichika kicked it up, sending it bouncing off the ceiling—which was enough to destroy Seito the Garland.

When Saraba made a run for him, Shichika transitioned into his next move—

“Fatal Orchid Five—Hika Rakuyo!”

Direct hit.

“Just my awful luck,” lamented Saraba, as she collapsed on the floor, muttering to herself rather than scream aloud.

Because she had not turned a blade on him, Shichika decided he could go a little easy on her. Hence why he had selected Hika Rakuyo, which for a Fatal Orchid was comparatively tame. If fortune favored her, she stood a chance of not losing her life.

Was this, too, the doing of Seito the Garland?

Recalling the unpleasant personality of the hermit magus—Shichika pondered these matters for a moment.

Then headed out.

“—Ten swords down.”



In the eleventh room on the way to the keep.

There stood a man wielding Dokuto the Basilisk.

Among the thousand Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki, which made you want to kill if you so much as held them, this obsidian sword possessed the strongest venom of them all.

Owned of late by Hohoh Maniwa, “The Divine Phoenix,” one of the Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

The eleventh owner of a Possessed with whom Shichika had battled.

“I am Bangai Rogiri,⁴⁹ one of the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate.”

Sporting a fine build, the man stated his name with a vacant glare, a vacant tone, and a vacant demeanor—then pointed the wobbling tip of the blade in the direction of Shichika—at least apparently.

“B-Bangai. Bangai Rogiri. Rogiri, Rogiri...Shikizaki? Shiki...Rogiri, Rogiri, Rogiri, Shiki...Shikiza, Shikizaki.”

“Hmm.”

Shichika watched Rogiri dispassionately.

“Alright...so even though it’s the Basilisk, the venom of the sword doesn’t devour anyone who owns it to the point where they start being Kiki Shikizaki. Although in keeping with the idea of Venom Despotism, it does seem like he’s

gone off the deep end...”

“Rogiri. Shikizaki? ShikiZAKI, Shiki, Shiki, Rogiri, ROGIRI, SHIKIzaki, ShiKIZAKI, SHI-ki-ZAKI, SHIkizaki, Kiki, Kiki, Rogiri, Rogiri, Rogiri, Rogiri, Rogiri—Shikizaki. Kikishikizaki. Kiki SHIKIZAKI. Ki-KI ShikiZAKI.”

“I’d been worried that I’d have another run in with that swordsmith—so this is kind of a relief...alright, hold on. I’ll put you out of your misery⁵⁰—releasing you from this absurd battle between swords.”

Bangai Rogiri.

After calling his foe by the name that he had only just now learned—Shichika charged at the wobbling, bobbing body of Bangai Rogiri.

Then, at the last second—jumped.

Indeed, the ceiling in this room was high enough that he could do the move full force. Leaping upwards, he pivoted his body lengthwise, then came down with a foot strike, dropping his ankle like an axe—

“Fatal Orchid Seven—Rakka Rozeki!”

Landing on the crown of Bangai Rogiri—he embroiled the fidgety blade of Dokuto the Basilisk in the process.

Purging any remnant⁵¹ of Kiki Shikizaki that had been embedded in the Basilisk.

“—Eleven swords down.”

Shichika had won eleven of eleven fights.

Each victory settled in the blink of an eye.

This is not to say that the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate were even remotely weak—but Shichika Yasuri was simply much too strong for them.

Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu.

After cutting his teeth fighting the oddest of the odd in all Japan—

His unfettered strength was inconceivable.

Before setting off on the Sword Hunt.

Togame the Schemer gave Shichika Yasuri an order.

“I cannot have you nicking up the swords.”

They needed to collect the swords—and Shichika had been ordered to do so without inflicting a scratch upon them.

This was a huge restriction⁵² for the Kyotoryu, and likewise for Shichika.

And yet—

At this point, there was no reason to honor this restriction.

Because his owner was no longer by his side.

“Ah...what a pain.”

Such were Shichika’s thoughts on his performance, winning eleven of eleven fights.

This—

The true potential of Shichika Yasuri, now that he was able to destroy the swords.

¹ 般若丸 HAN'NYA MARU “Whole Wisdom” 般若 HAN'NYA Japanese transliteration of the Sanskrit *prajñā*, and the name of a classic female devil mask in Noh drama 丸 MARU circle; suffix appended to ships, youth names, *etc.*

² ぱきん PAKIN onomatopoeia for sharp splitting sound

³ まるで MARU DE at all pun on 丸 MARU the suffix in Hanyamaru

⁴ 鬼宿不埒 ONIYADORI FURACHI “Demon Dwelling of the Miscreant” plays on らちが明かない RACHI GA AKANAI making no progress

⁵ 坊主頭 BŌZU ATAMA “monk head” bald in the manner of a Buddhist monk

⁶ 取るに足りない TORU NI TARINAI not worth taking (fighting over)

⁷ 陣形 JINKEI formation (of troops or armaments)

⁸ 巴暁 TOMOE AKATSUKI “Spiraling Sunrise”

⁹ 眼帯 GANTAI “eye obi”

¹⁰ よかれあしかれ YOKARE ASHIKARE for better or for worse

¹¹ 付け焼刃 TSUKE YAKIBA “tacked on brand” borrowed knowledge

¹² 取り返しはつかない TORIKAESHI WA TSUKANAI irredeemable (situation)

¹³ 浮義待秋 FUGI MATSUAKI “Floating Honor, Waiting for Autumn”

- 14 好敵手 KŌTEKISHU “favored enemy hand” worthy opponent
- 15 現物 GENBUTSU “the actual thing” vs. legends, rumors
- 16 花鳥風月 KACHŌ FŪGETSU “flowers, birds, wind, moon” splendor of the natural world
- 17 巨体 巨大 KYOTAI KYODAI “huge in body” “hugely big”
- 18 伊賀甲斐路 IGA KAIRO “The Aailed Road of Iga” the same Iga famous for ninja
- 19 筋肉騙し KIN’NIKU DAMASHI “faking muscles”
- 20 ぐだぐだと GUDA GUDA TO onomatopoeia for aimless dithering
- 21 口上を述べている KŌJŌ WO NOBETE IRU offering one’s opinion; giving one’s spiel
- 22 どばあっ DOBAH onomatopoeia for onslaught of liquid or matter
- 23 同然 DŌZEN for all intents and purposes
- 24 自重 JIJŪ “self weight”
- 25 子々 BŌFURA mosquito larva
- 26 離反 RIHAN defect
- 27 無念を晴らして MUNEN WO HARASHITE dispelling resentment; avenging
- 28 不死身 FUJIMI “deathless in body”
- 29 胡乱 URON shady (individual)
- 30 覚悟を決めるのだな KAKUGO WO KIMERU NODANA set your resolve

“prepare to die”

31 虚を突く KYO WO TSUKU “stab the gap” vs. 虚刀流 KYOTŌRYŪ

32 非常 HIJŌ unusual

33 骸 MUKURO corpse

34 所有者は刀自体である SHOYŪSHA WA KATANA JITAI DE ARU the owner being the katana itself

35 灰賀欧 HAIGA Ō “Ashen Celebration of Europe”

36 鉤爪 KAGITSUME “hooked nails” claws

37 応用編 ŌYŌHEN “applied version” vs. 応用花 ŌYŌKA freestyle ikebana

38 ひとりごちる HITORI GOCHIRU talk to oneself

39 残骸 ZANGAI remains of a destroyed building, vehicle, etc.

40 律する RISSURU regulate

41 墨ヶ丘黒母 SUMIGAOKA KOKUBO “Inky Hill, Mother of Black” echoes 国母 KOKUBO “nation mother” empress; mother of the emperor

42 獰猛者 DŌMŌSHA ferocious individual

43 木っ端微塵 KOPPA MIJIN “wood pieces, small scraps” 木 KI tree/wood

44 すっからかん SUKKARAKAN bankrupt, broke; empty

45 皿場工舎 SARABA KŌSHA “Plate Place, Work House” echoes さらば SARABA fare thee well and カラバ侯爵 KARABA KŌSHAKU Marquis of Carabas (the con in *Puss in Boots*)

46 鉢巻 HACHIMAKI “pot sash” 鉢 HACHI can also mean cranium

47 法被 HAPPI short wraparound coat, often worn during festivals or, more recently, at sales

48 けったいな KETTAI NA bizarre

49 呂桐番外 ROGIRI BANGAI “Backbone Paulownia, the Bonus”

50 楽にしてやる RAKU NI SHITE YARU make comfortable; euthanize

51 残滓 ZANSHI the dregs

52 縛り SHIBARI rein; limitation

CHAPTER FIVE

SHICHIKA
YASURI



In the final room on the way to the keep.

A grand hall, whose interior was expansive as that of the third chamber.

A blond-haired blue-eyed woman and a bemasked gentleman—awaited Shichika Yasuri.

Princess Negative—and Emonzaemon Soda.

“Look at you go—Shichika,” said Princess Negative, the second that¹ she saw him.

Smiling wide—she praised Shichika for his trouble.²

“You sure surprised me, showing up like that—don’t you agree, Emonzaemon?”

Prompted thus by Princess Negative, Emonzaemon answered from behind her.

“Same here,” he nodded. “I’m nothing short of stunned.”³

“Really? Well, I suppose it does a body good to be spooked now and then—”
Come to think of it.

This was the first time Shichika had seen the two of them together.

By now, it goes without saying that Emonzaemon Soda played the same role

for Princess Negative as the Kyotoryu played for the Schemer—but in polar contrast to Togame and Shichika’s inseparability, Princess Negative and Emonzaemon always appeared separately.

Not merely separated—by the ceiling.

While Princess Negative remained at Mansion Negative—Emonzaemon zipped all around the country. From the sound of it, he had been tailing Togame and Shichika since fairly early in their journey—

“Now then, Shichika, how’s about a proper greeting?” Hiding her lips behind her metal fan, Princess Negative made this impertinent remark. “Apparently that nasty woman has neglected to adequately educate her henchman—such a pity.”

“Didn’t you say that you’d be waiting in the keep?” Shichika broke his silence and spoke up, though not because she had provoked him. “If memory serves me, this place—is not the keep. I’m pretty sure it’s just beyond this.”

“I reject that notion,” Princess Negative replied. “When Emonzaemon spoke with you using his Vocal Craft, our procedure was still undecided⁴—but you can rest assured. His Excellency, Masatsuna Yanari, Eighth Shogun of the Owari Bakufu, is without question in the castle keep, up on the topmost floor—

not trying to slip away.”

“...”

“Or rather, I’m not letting him slip away.”

Princess Negative—turned on her heel.

Opening the fusuma behind her, she ascended the staircase beyond the threshold with the greatest of ease. Emonzaemon remained focused on

Shichika, not looking back to watch the Princess go.

It would appear her time with him was over.

Makes sense.

For Princess Negative, this was just a cameo⁵—whereas the star attraction at this juncture was none other than Emonzaemon Soda.

“You’re right—Shichika.” Still turned away from him, Princess Negative paused on the staircase. “Since you stand a decent chance of dying—I thought I would lay eyes on you for old time’s sake. I may have hated the Schemer with a passion, but I never really hated you.”

“...”

“On the off chance you can take down Emonzaemon, come up these stairs and see me—it’s basically a straight shot. Once you’re that far, you may kill me.”

“Hey, Princess,” shouted Shichika. “Wait a second—”

“Emonzaemon.”

Interrupting Shichika, Princess Negative redirected the conversation toward her henchman, Emonzaemon.

“I hereby order you—to slay the Kyotoryu.”

“Your wish is my command, Your Highness,” Emonzaemon said meekly. “However—if I am to slay the Kyotoryu, Kiki Shikizaki’s master plan will be effectively negated.”

“Indeed—though in case you haven’t noticed, I am an exceedingly negative person,” said Princess Negative—doubtlessly grinning. “My desire for Kiki Shikizaki’s grand design to reach fruition—is only matched by my desire to see his grand design in shambles.”⁶

“ ... ”

“I’m confident you’ll make one or the other a reality for me.”

With that—Princess Negative continued up the staircase. No sooner had she disappeared than Emonzaemon Soda closed the fusuma without a sound behind him.

“Uninteresting,” said Emonzaemon.

Speaking through that mask—on which were scrawled the words “NON-NINJA.”

“As I’ve said before...I knew someday that you and I would come to blows—but I never thought that it would end like this.”

“Like what?” Shichika interjected, perplexed at what Emonzaemon had said. “What are you talking about?”

“Like I’m being told to do a song and dance—that’s what. When I fight, I’d rather only do so to enact the wishes of the Princess. I don’t care if he’s Her Highness’s ancestor. Fighting to carry out the grand design of Kiki Shikizaki—is the nastiest fate imaginable.”

“Huh.” Shichika nodded.

Hearing that Princess Negative was the descendant of Kiki Shikizaki did not come as a surprise to Shichika, so much as it connected all the dots—

This certainly explained a lot. In fact, now that he knew as much, it seemed impossible for things to have been any other way.

However—in that case, what was this grand design of Kiki Shikizaki that the Princess had mentioned?

“Don’t you feel the same?” asked Emonzaemon. “I’m sure you’d rather only

fight for the sake of the Schemer—which is exactly what you’re trying to do now. You’re so aggrieved by the murder of this one woman, you’re willing to do something as absurd as besiege Owari Castle on your own. Ready to take me down, as your direct adversary, along with Princess Negative, who issued the command, and the original target of the Schemer—the shogun, Masatsuna Yanari. But if this is all a song and dance for Kiki Shikizaki—”

“You guys must be making some kind of a mistake.”

“Huh?”

Faced with this most unexpected reaction—a befuddled Emonzaemon cocked his head at Shichika, a rare gesture for him.

“Mistaken? Well, you’re the one who’s wearing the Schemer’s old kimono. Is that not a symbol that you’re carrying out her will—or her last wishes?”⁷

Dejectedly—lethargically.

Or even sulkily—Shichika answered.

“I guess you could say...after Togame died, I finally realized that a person—or a sword, can’t ever really do something for someone else.”

“...”

“Like you said, this whole time⁸ I’ve been telling myself I was fighting for Togame, and I actually was—at first following orders without thinking, and eventually making following orders my agenda...but maybe that Kuizame Maniwa guy had it right all along.”

What are you fighting for?

If you have to ask yourself why you’re doing it—

Don’t even bother fighting.

“I mean, at the end of the day, Togame only thought about herself.”

“About—herself?”

“Selfish, to the very end—she ordered me to live my life. Only cared about herself—not sure how else to put it, really. But it’s no use, Emonzaemon.”

Shichika smiled—a faint and miserable smile.

The smile of exhaustion.

“Because that’s why I fell for Togame.”

“...”

“I loved that—about her. So in that sense—I think I was only ever fighting for myself.”

“Then why on earth—would you come storming into Owari Castle?”

“To die.”

Shichika answered instantly.

Instantly, to Emonzaemon’s question.

“Togame ordered me to live my life—but I no longer have a reason to abide. You see, Emonzaemon Soda—no one but you is capable of killing me. *Only you—who killed Togame.*”

“Unenthused,” Emonzaemon replied. “Don’t make me laugh—barging into the national stronghold like some child with a temper... If this is part of Kiki Shikizaki’s master plan, he sure had a sense of humor.”

Then—Emonzaemon.

Produced two lumps of metal from his jacket.

These were familiar to Shichika—*weapons* he would not forget.

The last time he beheld them, he had not felt any lifeforce—but now he felt it smartly.

He knew these lumps of metal—were masterworks of Kiki Shikizaki.

He knew they were Ento the Bead.

He knew they were the final sword—last of the Twelve Possessed.

“A revolver—and an automatic.” Emonzaemon raised each gun as he spoke. “Believed, *at least at present*, to be the last sword Kiki Shikizaki crafted in his lifetime.”

“The sword he made—so he could complete me?”

“Ah. I see you know your history. That saves us time,” said Emonzaemon. “Right—after all, you met up with Rinne Higaki. Not to mention...Kiki Shikizaki, the man himself, who possessed Hohoh Maniwa through Dokuto the Basilisk—”

“Is the Bead how you killed off all of those Maniwacs?”

“Not all. Things turned out differently with Umigame Maniwa—but with Oshidori Maniwa and Penguin Maniwa, the answer is yes. Like the other Mutant Blades, this weapon should not exist in this era—making even the most expert ninja powerless to stop it.”

“Penguin too...”

So things turned out—as Togame suspected.

The Maniwa—were now eradicated.

Shichika was at a loss—for how to process such a fact.

“Great weapons for catching people unawares. I suppose Penguin only died after grasping their mechanics—but what about you? Have you figured out what makes the Bead tick?”

“Togame told me right before she died. They’re some kind of a firearm—but unlike normal flintlocks, they can be fired rapidly.”

“Brilliant. Perceptive even on her deathbed—although, I’m not the least bit inconvenienced by her perceptivity.”

“The bullets punched through her belly.⁹ I found them on the ground way behind her. I’ve heard that flintlocks use round bullets...but these little guys were shaped like tubes. I guess that makes them faster?” Shichika said. “Anyway, I started thinking—how many of those bullets could those lumps of metal actually hold?”¹⁰

“You’re hoping I’ll run out of ammunition?” Emonzaemon shrugged—disappointedly. “I’ll just tell you—the revolver holds six shots, while the automatic is good for eleven. Needless to say, I reloaded after gunning down the Schemer.”

“...”

“Are you in despair? Trust me, there’s no way you’re dodging all seventeen shells—as much as I applaud the Schemer for identifying rapid and continuous fire as Ento the Bead’s chief characteristic, she missed another vital detail—precision. The accuracy of the Bead—is extraordinarily high.”

“Thanks, I realized that—which is why I’ve already hatched a plan for slipping by.”

“Hatched what?”

“You know, a scheme,” Shichika said—taking position.

Specifically, Kyotoryu Form Seven—the Kakitsubata.

A mobile form, showcasing his kaleidoscopic footwork.

“That’s enough talk outta you.¹¹ Let’s get to it, Emonzaemon. I’m a sword the same as you’re a sword. No need for speeches.”

Emonzaemon Soda.

Trusty blade of Princess Negative.

Shichika Yasuri.

The katana incarnate.

The violence—of sword against sword.

The cut-throat opposition¹²—of one sword against another.

“Indubitably.”

In turn—Emonzaemon braced himself, sinking at the knees and bending at the hips, the muzzles of Ento the Bead trained on Shichika.

“Alright—show me what sort of scheme a lummoX like you is capable of hatching.”

“I’m more than happy to—but too bad you’ll be torn to smithereens.”

“I’ll end this in a heartbeat.”

“Same here.”

“Don’t you want to take off that heavy-looking finery?”

“Nah. I’d rather keep it on.”

“I am Lieutenant Emonzaemon Soda, formerly a ninja of the Aioi Clan—and currently under the employ of Princess Negative, whom I now serve as Counselor to the Inspector General of the Yanari Shogunate.”

“And I am Shichika Yasuri—Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu.”

May the best sword win—go.

While there was nobody available to give that signal to begin—both parties started at the same time as if they had signed off¹³ on it.

Kaleidoscopic footwork.

Using the Kakitsubata—Shichika Yasuri dashed about the room.

Never heading straight for Emonzaemon, nor trying to fake him out, but simply dashing every which way.

“Hmph,” Emonzaemon sneered at this performance from Shichika. “You think that I can’t hit a moving target? This is so pathetic that it’s painful to watch—that strategy could work, if I only had one or two bullets, but not up against seventeen—there’s no way that you can squeak by every shot. It’s physically impossible—not even Hakuhei Sabi or Nanami Yasuri could pull it off.”

“Sis...”

That got Shichika thinking.

As a matter of fact—the move he was about to try was just the sort of thing his sister would be apt to pull. Nanami Yasuri, that genius who counted death among her oldest friends—

“Wohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Switching gears.

Shichika saw his chance—and charged full speed ahead at Emonzaemon.

But Emonzaemon was unperturbed.

Immune to all diversionary tactics.

Instead—he calmly turned the muzzles of the guns on Shichika.

“It is an odious task to kill someone you once spared—but if you’ve come to die, there is nothing I can do. Die with your regrets, Shichika Yasuri. I’m curious what you’ll say—as you do.”

Bang.

Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang Bang.

Three shots from the revolver.

Four shots from the automatic.

Emonzaemon fired seven body shots—at Shichika Yasuri.

That sound, both hollow and enormous—reverberated through the room.

Echoing.

“Wh...ahh!”

And yet—this stupefied scream¹⁴ came from Emonzaemon.

No sooner than the bullets had been fired—Shichika Yasuri came barreling forth on his kaleidoscopic footwork, stopping right under Emonzaemon’s nose, a mere hairsbreadth away—practically inside his suitcoat.





And from there—Form Four: the Asagao.

Shichika took the Asagao.

For Ryuryoku Kako, the Fatal Orchid playing off this form—and for Shichika Hachiretsu Redux, which led off Ryuryoku Kako into the other six Fatal Orchids—

The circumstances were ideal.

“Da-Damn you, Kyotoryu. How could you possibly dodge—that many bullets?”

“I didn’t dodge them.”

Answered Shichika.

Clear as day.

“At least half of them—hit me.”

“...nkk!”

Though at a loss for words—it appeared that Emonzaemon understood.

Indeed.

Hence—the Kakitsubata.

Shichika was not trying to elude aim—nor trying to dodge the bullets. He was simply *scattering*¹⁵ the bullets as they came.

Rapid and continuous—and precise.

Collectively, for the worse.

Emonzaemon had ventured to unload his fusillade in such a way that Shichika could not evade him, casting a veritable net of bullets, whose trajectories would catch him from all sides—but this was exactly what Shichika expected.

Fact is, Shichika was not trying to evade them.

Catching as few—or as many bullets as necessary, he closed the distance to Emonzaemon.

And then—up close and personal.

Too close for comfort.

Emonzaemon could not fire Ento the Bead.

Even if he still had over half his bullets, it was not a useful weapon at such incredibly close quarters—they may have been compact and handy, but the whole point of these guns was to fire projectiles!

To make things worse, these close quarters—were ideal for the unarmed Kyotoryu.

If the Kyotoryu depended on some kind of weapon—say your run-of-the-mill katana, Shichika would have needed space to use it.

And if such space were available—Emonzaemon could have drawn the Bead.

Ento the Bead was fit for combat whether it was long-distance or short-distance, long-range or short-range—but since the Kyotoryu was an unarmed and swordless school—

These incredibly close quarters—corked up¹⁶ the two guns!

“W-Wait—I’m sure at least three of those shots blew right through you!”

“Four,” said Shichika, hanging his head. “One in the leg, two in the belly, one in the arm.”

“What! Then how come—you’re still moving!”

“Because I was ready—catching them was on my agenda from the start.”

Agenda.

Though somewhat unclear, considering the circumstances, whether Shichika should use this word in such a way.

“It’s best to take a hit that can’t be dodged. Simple as that. From the start...I didn’t try to dodge them.”

“...nkk!”

“Togame gave me orders...to protect myself.”

Just as he had been ordered.

To protect the swords.

Just as he had been ordered.

To protect Togame.

He had been forbidden to be injured—not a scratch.

And yet.

There was no longer any reason to obey Togame—whatsoever!

Now that he was licensed to destroy the swords, and licensed to harm himself, Shichika Yasuri exhibited his maximum potential!

“Urk...”

Emonzaemon had once reported to the Princess that the essence of the Kyotoryu was in its powers of defense—and while this may be so, it missed the heart of the matter.

What would happen if the Kyotoryu—forsook its powers of defense?

He should have taken this in mind!

The scheme that Togame the Schemer had chosen not to convey to Shichika Yasuri, in his encounter with Rinne Higaki at Hyakkeijo—!

“...You wanna die or what?!”

“For the last time, yeah!”

“Pshhh...”

Though unable, at such close quarters, to so much as take aim with Ento the Bead—Emonzaemon still clutched and pointed with them in vain.

“Non-Ninpo—Endlessly Unsparing...wait!”

In his desperation—truly so pathetic it was painful to watch, Emonzaemon Soda opted for the move of an old friend.

An old friend.

His best friend, who had been his everything, in the years before he teamed up with Princess Negative.

Blended with the special features of Ento the Bead—

“Decapitation Cyclone!”¹⁷

“Shichika Hachiretsu Redux!”

Blood geysered—then it was settled.

In an instant, this match between kindred spirits¹⁸—had been settled.



At Owari Castle, on the top floor of the keep—

Princess Negative stood stiffly, in the middle of the room, as was her custom back at Mansion Negative—simply waiting. What made things different were the fact that she was in a different place, and the fact that the seat of honor—was occupied by Masatsuna Yanari, Eighth Shogun of the Owari Bakufu.

“Hey...you, over there.”

As if unable to bear the silence any longer, Masatsuna addressed her.

“Where exactly—do things stand?”

“No need to worry, Your Excellency—everything is going according to plan. Thanks to the allegiance of your Eleven Guardians, our plan will soon attain fruition.”

“Ah, alright,” Masatsuna, apparently relieved, hummed agreeably behind the bamboo screen. “W-Well then, when all is said and done, the Eleven Guardians must be rewarded.”

“...”

Princess Negative was well aware.

Well aware that the Eleven Guardians of the Yanari Shogunate had fallen at the hands of Shichika Yasuri—but there was no use *apprising* His Excellency of such a thing.

Doing so would only make this coward¹⁹ try to escape—exactly what the Princess was trying to prevent by staying in this room, essentially *chaperoning*²⁰ the Yanari Shogun.

—Thanks to Shichika, those meddlesome Eleven Guardians have been eliminated.

—Things are happening so close to what I planned it’s almost scary.

More often than not²¹—this is precisely when an unexpected mishap hits you out of nowhere, so I'd better not indulge myself and simply exult—

“S-So we're good? My reign—is the Yanari Shogunate guaranteed a thousand years of prosperity?”

“Sure—”

Princess Negative reassured him.

While privately rejecting him.

—How could this old man derive so happy a conclusion from what I've said?

—What a sorry fool.

And yet, the time had come.

A swift kick blew through—the fusuma.

Sending it crashing inward.

Beyond which—stood a man slathered in blood.

His tousled hair, his giant muscular physique—smeared incarnadine.²²

The brash and brilliant finery that he adorned was bright with blood—looking pretty cool.

Here to join them, on the top floor of the castle keep—was Shichika Yasuri.

Not Emonzaemon Soda.

“...”

This must be—my unexpected mishap.

Princess Negative coolheadedly accepted the situation.

“U-Uhh... Who the hell are you!” roared Masatsuna.

In a panic-stricken²³ voice.

However, as if ignoring him—Shichika tossed the contents of his hands at Princess Negative's feet.

First came two lumps of metal.

A revolver.

And an automatic.

Ento the Bead.

The last of the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki.

The barrels of both of which were twisted to oblivion—beyond repair, unfit for any further use as weapons.

But Shichika then tossed her something else—a mask.

A mask on which were scrawled the words “NON-NINJA.”

“I have a message from Emonzaemon.”

Slathered in blood.

Covered with wounds—Shichika spoke in a low voice.

“These are his parting words—heed them with care.”

“Heed them I will. Well?” Fanning herself with her fan of metal—Princess Negative glanced casually at the mask tossed at her feet and nodded.

“Your Highness, please forgive me—for dying in your name.”

Shichika relayed the message faithfully—down to the tone of voice.

“That's what he told me, just before he died.”

“...Miserable²⁴ fellow, through and through—suppose he thought I'd find that

moving?”

Speaking quickly—Princess Negative dropped her metal fan on the tatami.

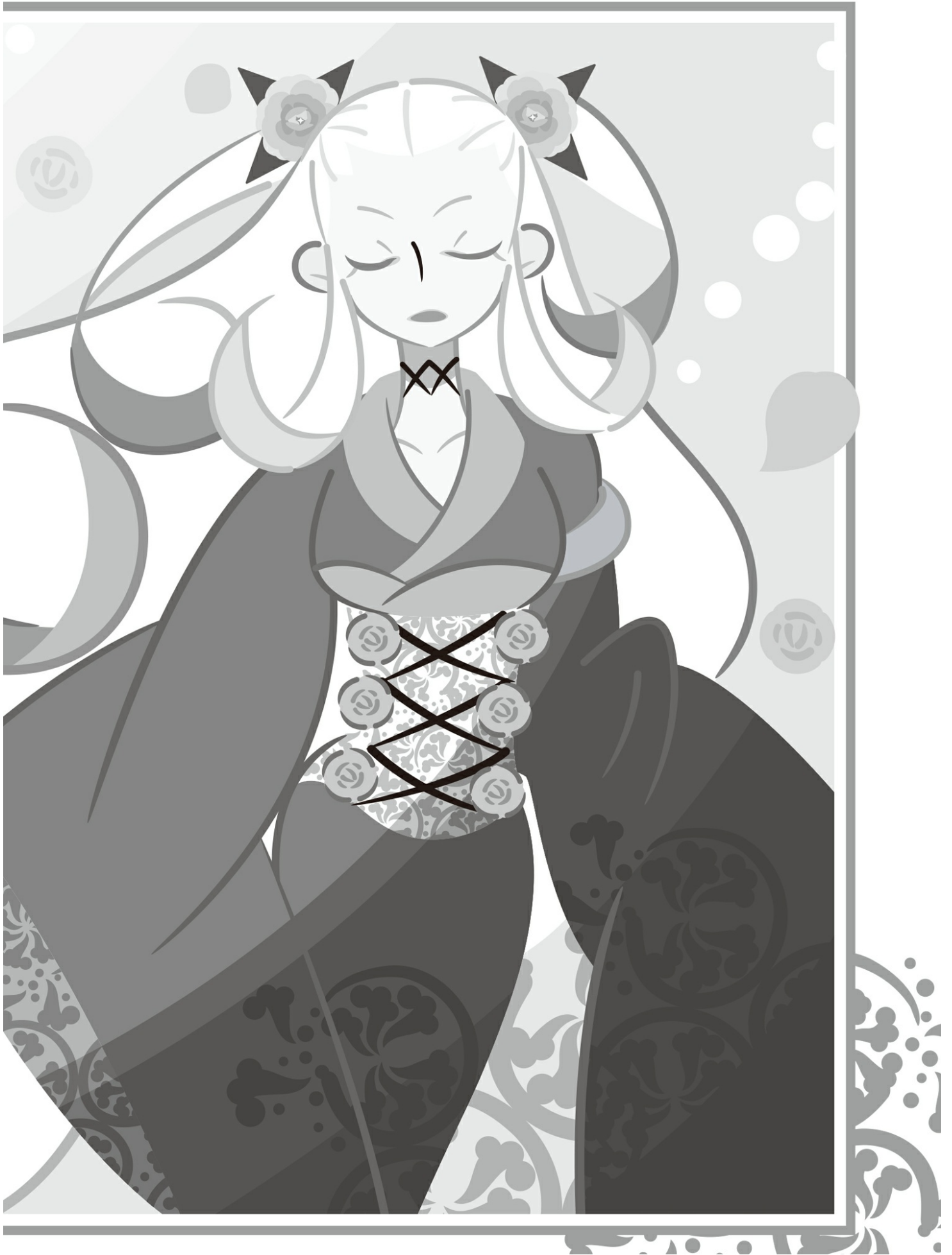
The fan fell perfectly over the mask—making a sound.

A lonesome sound.

“Well then, let’s finish things up—Shichika, as promised, you may kill me.”

“Afraid not.” He walked slowly forward—befouling the tatami with blood, taking one step at a time, Shichika shook his head at Princess Negative. “I think one more is all I can face.”





“ ... ”

“Those four shots from Ento the Bead were one thing...but that Decapitation Cyclone was a bastard. If the Bead had been a tiny bit stronger, I would’ve been the one left for dead...”

As he spoke—Shichika walked past Princess Negative.

Heading straight—toward Masatsuna.

“What...!”

Behind the bamboo screen—there was a clomping ruckus.

Leaping up and trying to escape and falling down.

Although at this point—there was no hope of escape.

“P-Princess Negative! What are you doing—will you not save me?”

“Save your breath, Your Excellency.” Without looking in his direction, the Princess threw her arms up, turned away. “I cannot even hold my own in battle—and besides, unless you’re killed, how is the tale supposed to end?”

“Wh-What?!”

“That bit about a thousand years of prosperity—was a lie. Merely a means for gaining audience with you. Last thing I want is for your regime to last that long—remember, I’m the descendant of Kiki Shikizaki. The collapse of the Owari Bakufu and the Yanari Shogunate are all part of our master plan.”

Princess Negative continued.

Stating the facts.

“Though strictly speaking, the plan involved a *different*²⁵ *bakufu*, and for that matter a *different shogunate*—we might have thwarted them, but a *similar* man,

you, taking over the nation and imposing the same state of peace and order, for the same end result, doesn't do at all. I suppose history—corrects itself. Though you have the Old Shogun to thank for that.”

“Wh-What are you saying? What is this *different* bakufu?”

“I speak of what might have been. Or rather, should have been.”

“Y-You mean to tell me, this whole time—”

“In coming here, I planned to murder you—but the Eleven Guardians were in the way. Not even Emonzaemon, for all his skill, could tackle eleven foes like that at once.”

“Y-You mean that having them fight him individually—and calling off the rank and file, was all a way of—”

“Shichika was kind enough to wipe out the Eleven Guardians...hence, as a token of thanks, I will afford him the task of killing you. As preordained by Kiki Shikizaki.”

“Bah...”

By now Masatsuna lacked the composure to interrogate her.

For just beyond the bamboo screen—was Shichika Yasuri.

Paused there.

Appraising.

“S-Stop—”

However he appeared to Masatsuna—the man was begging for his life.

“Wh-What good will come of killing me—why would you want to do that? Did you not round up the Mutant Blades of Kiki Shikizaki for my sake?”

“Definitely not for your sake.”

Shichika spoke—in a subdued voice.

As if it even hurt for him to breathe.

“Because of someone like you—Togame threw her life away.²⁶ But in the end, what goes around comes around.”

“Wait... T-Togame? Who is that? You mean—the Schemer? That was her name?”

“At this point, killing you won’t help Togame get revenge, much less help me feel any better—”

“Then why!”

“Because. I’m making an example outta you.”²⁷

Shichika—gazed towards the ceiling.

Though he was not exactly looking at the ceiling.

His eyes closed—as if he were remembering something.

Princess Negative observed him from the corner of her eye.

Wondering—what kind of a reminiscence²⁸ this might be.

She had to wonder.

—Figure.

—He must be thinking of that nasty woman.

“Hey, Princess.”

Quietly—while taking his position.

Taking Form Four—the Asagao.

Shichika spoke to Princess Negative.

“Togame said that if I saw you, I should send along her thanks.”

“Really? Hmm—I’m not sure I’ve done anything I should be thanked for.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything at all.”

“You actually liked Togame, didn’t you?”

“...”

In answer to this simple question—

“That nasty woman.”

Princess Negative offered not one—

“I wasn’t—”

Or two.

“—not—”

But three.

“—lacking in hate for her.”

A triple negative.

“Gotcha,” nodded Shichika—and as if this news had salved him, he twisted even deeper into the stance.

He could not miss—no matter what.

He could not mess up his final move.

He had to seal the deal—no room for error.

“W-Wait! Calm down! H-Hear me out! P-Please, don’t! Please don’t kill me!”

Masatsuna Yanari—yelled like the dickens.

“Wait, wait! My world is yours! Don’t you desire the world?!”

“Who needs it!!”

All told, the Kyotoryu had seven secret moves.

Fatal Orchid One: Kyoka Suigetsu

Fatal Orchid Two: Kacho Fugetsu

Fatal Orchid Three: Hyakka Ryoran

Fatal Orchid Four: Ryuryoku Kako

Fatal Orchid Five: Hika Rakuyo

Fatal Orchid Six: Kinjo Tenka

Fatal Orchid Seven: Rakka Rozeki

Optimally synchronized, the fastest possible deployment of these was the Last Fatal Orchid of the Kyotoryu, “Shichika Hachiretsu Redux”—spraying blood relentlessly, flapping the sleeves of his flamboyant finery, Shichika nearly tore his vocal cords, crying out at the absolute top of his lungs...

“Cheerio-o-o-oh!”

■ ■

The blood-curdling²⁹ battle cry of Shichika Yasuri.

Is said to have been heard in every corner³⁰ of Owari—resounding all over the city.

¹ 開口一番 KAIKŌ ICHIBAN “open the mouth first thing”

² 労を労う RŌ WO NEGIRAU “thank for toil” the verb and object employ the same character ³ 意外以外の何物でも IGAI IGAI NO NANIMONO DEMO “nothing but unexpected”

⁴ 不確か FUTASHIKA vague, in limbo 不 FU not 確か TASHIKA certain ⁵ 顔見せ KAOMISE “show of face”

⁶ 挫ける KUJIKERU falter; get sprained (e.g. an ankle) ⁷ 意志 遺志 ISHI ISHI intentions wishes of the deceased ⁸ 終始一貫して SHŪSHI IKKAN SHITE “from start to finish”

⁹ 腹部 FUKUBU “stomach portion” abdomen ¹⁰ 内蔵 NAIZŌ incorporate; house vs. 内臓 NAIZŌ internal organ (which adds the element denoting flesh 月 NIKUZUKI) ¹¹ 御託はたくさん GOTAKU WA TAKUSAN “too much oracle (bloviation)”

¹² しのぎを削る SHINOGI WO KEZURU tense competition literally, the abrasive grinding of sword upon sword in a clash of blades ¹³ 示し合わせた SHIMESHI AWASETA arranged beforehand vs. 合図 AIZU signal ¹⁴ 驚愕の声 KYŌGAKU NO KOE shocked voice ¹⁵ 散らそうと CHIRASŌ TO try to disperse same verb as petals “falling”

¹⁶ 封じる FŪJIRU seal if pronounced HŌJIRU, enfeoff ¹⁷ 断罪炎刀 DANZAI ENTŌ combines 断罪円 DANZAI’EN Decapitation Cycle 炎刀 ENTŌ the Bead ¹⁸ 似た者同士 NITA MONO DŌSHI (very) similar people ¹⁹ 小心な男

SHŌSHIN NA OTOKO “small-hearted man”

²⁰ 見張っている MIHATTE IRU keep an eye on, monitor ²¹ 往々にして ŌŌ
NI SHITE from time to time frequently a fatalistic comment ²² 真っ赤
MAKKA “redder than red”

²³ 恐慌に支配された KYŌKŌ NI SHIHAI SARETA ruled by terror ²⁴ 辛気臭
い SHINKI KUSAI “reeking of melancholy”

²⁵ 某 BŌ “a certain”

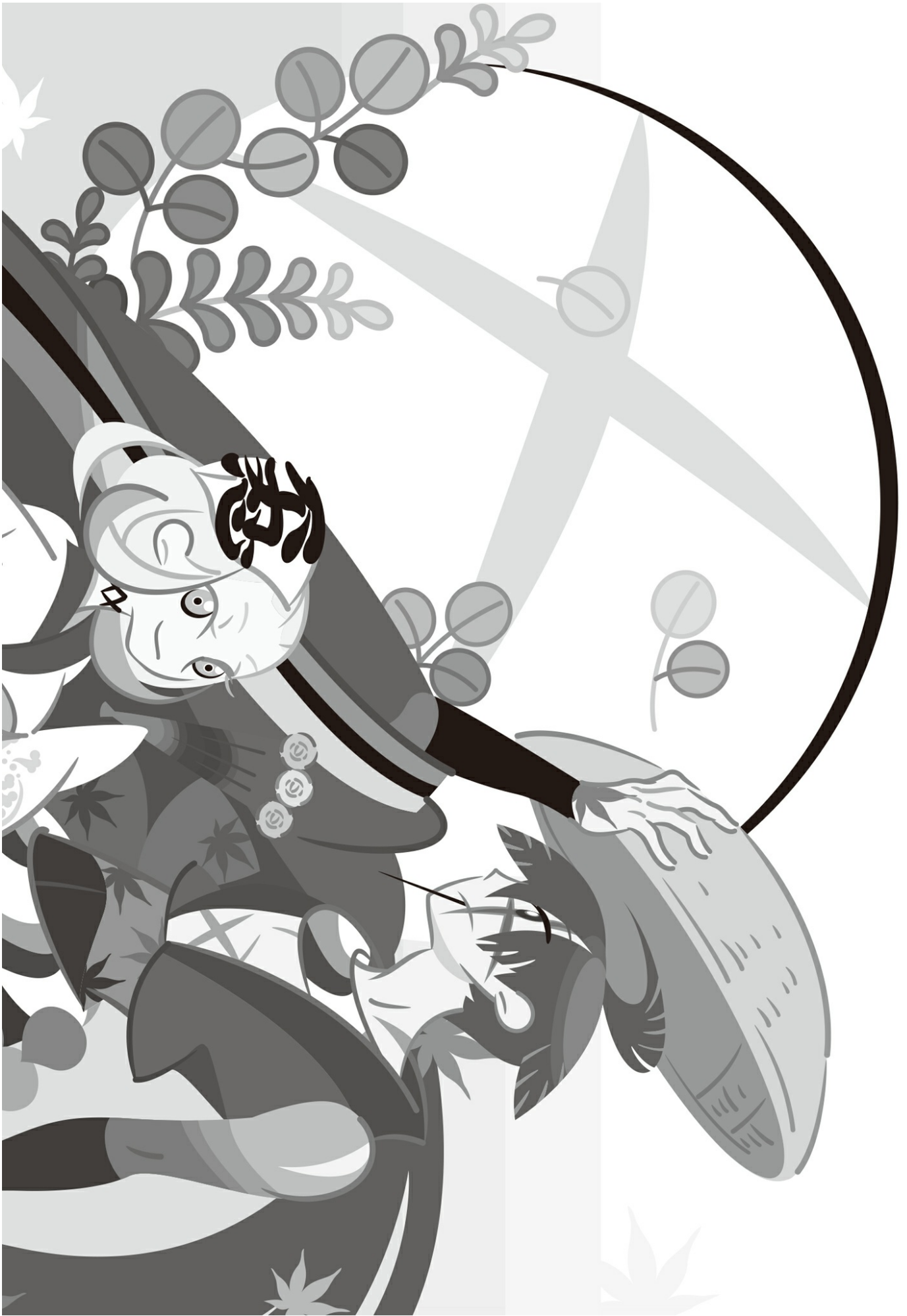
²⁶ 生涯を棒に振っちゃった SHŌGAI WO BŌ NI FUCCHIMATTA squandered
a lifetime ²⁷ しめしはつけなきゃ SHIMESHI WA TSUKENAKYA ought to
demonstrate (how to behave) ²⁸ 回想 KAISŌ the same word used
elsewhere to tag flashbacks or exposition of the backstory ²⁹ 死力を尽くし
た SHIRYOKU WO TSUKUSHITA “expending mortal force”

³⁰ 八百八町 HAPPYAKU YACHŌ “eight hundred and eight
neighborhoods” the whole extent



EPILOGUE







In Tango—on Haphazard Island.
Across the waters from the Cliffs of Shinso.
There is a tiny island, only ten miles around.
A desert island, not listed on any of the maps.
On which once lived a family of three.
A father, a daughter, and a son.
Though at this point—not a soul.
The desert island was once again deserted.¹
No one remained to call the place Haphazard Island.



Inaba—Inaba Desert.
The sole desert region in the entire nation.

And in that wasteland, but a single building standing—Gekoku Castle.

Left in abeyance with the death of Ginkaku Uneri, its only resident—abandoned to the sands of time, yet nevertheless remaining, not one brick out of place.

A natural fortress, surrounded by both desert and mirage.

And this fortress, thanks to its natural environs, went totally unnoticed—and would be there ad infinitum.

Though it may settle into ruin.

One thousand years hence—it would remain.



Izumo—Triad Shrine.

Where women from all over Japan, whose lives were marked by hardship, convened to live as Kuromiko, in the service of the gods.

After the death of Meisai Tsuruga, the bakufu had dispatched a chief priest to take her place, whereupon the shrine lost its militant character—though by no means compromising its capacity as a safe haven.

In fact, it became all the stronger.

Thanks to a girl subsequently dispatched by the bakufu—Konayuki Itezora, who excelled in her role as protector of the Kuromiko. Exhibiting marvelous²

strength, she soothed the deeply wounded Kuromiko, largely thanks to her innate innocence.



Suo—Ganryu Island.

One of the Two Great Holy Sites for swordsmen, where over two hundred years ago, a man bearing a greatsword fought another bearing two. And later on, it was the site of yet another epic battle—in which the Strongest fought the Swordless, carving a new legend into the history of the island.

And yet, the details of that battle—how the Strongest vied against the Swordless, and how the Swordless overpowered the Strongest, remain unknown to all.

But the fact that Ganryu Island shrunk to less than half its size as a result of their duel is testament to the ferocity of the battle.



Satsuma—Dakuon Harbor.

Where the battles in the Basket never ceased.

A round arena set up in the middle of the harbor town.

At its center—a giant of a man cried out in victory.

A man by the name of Kanara Azekura.

Captain of the Armored Pirates, who ruled over the town.

Once always clad in armor—he now displayed his brawny body³ for all to see, baring his muscles for the crowd.

Things were no different from the days when he wore armor—he was still the shining star of the arena. In fact, because dispensing of the Armor had permitted him to vary up his repertoire, one might say that his popularity was greater than ever.

Henceforth, this nation would find itself, willy nilly, for better or for worse, in a new era where it had no choice but to turn its gaze beyond the surf—an era calling for none other than the talents of their kind, adventurers who crossed the seas with ease.



Ezo—Mt. Odori.

Level One Disaster Area—perpetually frozen,⁴ blizzarding nonstop throughout the year.

Though designated a disaster area on account of being unfit for human habitation, the place was formerly the home of the Itezora Clan; but after their entire village, save Konayuki, was annihilated, it became truly devoid of human life.

Nevertheless, the snow continued to fall unchecked—suggesting that this place’s status as a disaster area would never be repealed, for all eternity.

In the end, people can never win against the grandeur that is nature—whether that person be a human or a sword.



Tosa—Seiryoin Gokenji Temple.

The second of the Two Great Holy Sites for swordsmen, and home to the Katana Buddha—the sole accomplishment of the Great Sword Hunt, that dastardly piece of legislation which became the legacy of the Old Shogun.

The epic family showdown that ensued between the Swordless and the Genius on these hallowed grounds only served, as with Ganryu Island, to boost the reputation of the temple.

Though it would take some time before the Gokenjiryu, which had been devastated by Nanami Yasuri, to restore itself—now and forevermore, the Katana Pilgrims will continue to arrive in droves from all over Japan, to behold Gokenji Temple on Mt. Sayabashiri.



Edo—Lake Fuyo.

Level One Disaster Area—a garbage dump, piled high with all the refuse of the world.

Or so it was, but once its steward, Skytron, had been disposed of, a plan was launched to rehabilitate Lake Fuyo.

Apparently, it was labeled a disaster area solely because of Skytron—and now that Skytron was no longer present, this development was perhaps only natural.

It would take whole centuries for the place to become the lake betokened by its name—but now it could be said, with some degree of certainty, that eventually that day would come.



Dewa—in Tendo's Shogi Village.

If Ganryu Island and Gokenji Temple were holy sites for swordsmen, then Shogi Village in Tendo was the holy land of shogi players—and though there was

a time when it was also known for swordsmanship, its reputation was a casualty of history.

And yet, at the heart of the village, there is a dojo where this all-but-forgotten legacy of swordsmanship has stubbornly persisted.

In the dojo of the Heartland School—whose swordplay was intent on giving life.

Only the master remains—stubbornly persisting.

The school's master, the latest incarnation of Zanki Kiguchi, whose claim to fame was vanquishing, if only once, the man without a sword who had defeated Hakuhei Sabi, the Strongest, and Nanami Yasuri, the Genius—would for a time amass a modest group of followers. Yet, ultimately, no one could keep up with Kiguchi's severe regimen, and before long, things regressed into the familiar solitude.⁵

However much Kiguchi shrugged at this turn of events.

Such an outcome was altogether unsurprising.

In any case, peace reigns over Shogi Village.



Oshu—Hyakkeijo.

The site of Hida Castle, erstwhile homestead of the Mastermind of the

Rebellion, and the Kaoyaku of Oshu, Takahito Hida, put to death here along with the majority of his associates, making the place a killing ground.

Reportedly, it was now home to a hermit magus.

A hermit whose appearance shifted with the eye of the beholder, and who would cause whoever met them, whether they liked it or not, to confront themselves—supposedly.

But this was no more than a rumor.

Once the hermit magus—Rinne Higaki, had bequeathed Seito the Legion to the Schemer, they disappeared from Hyakkeijo, apparently deciding that their work was done.

Where had they gone?

There was no way of knowing.

Perhaps they had set up in some town or another, taking on a new identity—unbeknownst to all those who beheld them.



Iga—New Maniwa.

This village, nestled in the mountains, originally the stronghold of the Onmitsu of the bakufu, had for a time served as a front for the Maniwa Clan, traitors to the bakufu—but when all was said and done, its tenure as New Maniwa was

pitifully short, less than a year.

Twelve Bosses of the Maniwa Ninja Clan.

Komori Maniwa, Shirasagi Maniwa, Kuizame Maniwa, Kamakiri Maniwa, Chocho Maniwa, Mitsubachi Maniwa, Kyoken Maniwa, Kawauso Maniwa, Umigame Maniwa, Oshidori Maniwa, Penguin Maniwa, Hohoh Maniwa.

Along with the innumerable civilians of the village.

Forty-seven souls in total.

All of whom were slain, embroiled into the Sword Hunt.

The Maniwa, a band of expert assassins—their name, like that of their sometime nemesis, the Aioi Clan, would vanish from the books of history.

An outcome all of them—accepted as inevitable.



In Owari—at Owari Castle.

Residence⁶ of the Yanari Shogun.

In accordance with the prophesy set forth by Kiki Shikizaki, the legendary swordsmith and the greatest soothsayer in history—the leader of the nation, Eighth Shogun of the Owari Bakufu, Masatsuna Yanari, had been assassinated by the Kyotoryu—Kyoto the Diamond.

And what happened as a result?

Absolutely nothing.

Unfortunately—or, perhaps fortunately—

This happening had not actually revised history.

Quite simply—the son of Masatsuna, heir apparent, assumed the title of Ninth Shogun.

The fact that a lone raider had snuck into Owari Castle had been covered up entirely, along with myriad other details. Meanwhile, the Kyotoryu was celebrated as a hero, who together with the Schemer had recovered the Twelve Possessed of Kiki Shikizaki, the masterworks which not even the Old Shogun had been able to capture.

As a result, the promise that the Schemer made to Nanami Yasuri, in vowing to restore the honor of Mutsue Yasuri was for all intents and purposes fulfilled—for in the end, she had effectively made good on her word.

Ergo, the efforts made by Kiki Shikizaki—and his ancestors, and his descendants, to revolt against history, reform society, and otherwise engage in Antihistory—ended in failure.

And so—



In Noto⁷—on the Hoshisuna⁸ Highway.

At a teahouse on that coastal road, created not from dirt but hardpacked sand, a man in a straw hat⁹ snacked placidly on dango.

He was a lanky, giant man.

Head of tousled hair, body taut with muscle.

As if to cover up his scratched and wounded skin—the man wore what appeared to be two dozen layers of brash and brilliant finery, flamboyant kimonos meant for women.

The Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu—Shichika Yasuri.

He no longer openly used such a title—for though he had been publicly lauded as a hero, the fact remained that he had snuck into Owari Castle and assassinated the sitting shogun, for which he had been banished by the bakufu.

And yet, perhaps none of this bothered him at all. Maybe he really thought he could disguise himself by wearing that prop of a straw hat, or maybe he had no intention to disguise himself in the first place—he looked placid, calm.

Munching away on his dango.

“Hmm. Japan sure is a big place,” he said—and pulled what looked like a notebook from the furoshiki set beside him. Its pages were filled not with writing, but with drawings.

Crude drawings, rendered with a brush.

Looking them over—Shichika shrugged.

As if unsatisfied with the pictures—

“Ah, there you are, Shichika. Found ya.”

Then.

From the westerly direction of the highway, a woman trotted into the teahouse—and pointed unabashedly at Shichika.

Blond-haired, blue-eyed—and wearing a kimono.

A woman whose mere presence made her stand out in this country more than Shichika, lanky and dressed in flamboyant robes—this was none other than Princess Negative.

Although.

She, too, like Shichika—no longer openly used such a title. As if to conceal her appearance, she wore her hair much shorter than before—and opted for an even simpler kimono. In lieu of a straw hat, she wore a bizarre mask, strapped to the right side of her head, the way kids often do at temple festivals.

And on the mask—was scrawled the word “NON-NINJA.”

She could not openly use her name.

That said, Princess Negative had been a moniker, not actually her name—yet even with her hair cut short, wearing a plain kimono and a bizarre mask, she had lost none of the elegance¹⁰ one would expect from a princess.

“Come on—don’t rush so far ahead of me, Shichika. I’m not as fragile as that nasty woman who prided herself on being as weak as shoji paper, but I’m no athlete either. I spent most of my days cooped up in the mansion.”

“...I don’t recall asking you to follow me.”

“I’m not the sort of heartless creature who won’t help out until she’s asked to.”

“You know, I do recall asking you *not* to follow me.”

“Don’t give me that. Once you got a little ways ahead, you plopped down here

and waited for me. Hey, I'll have that tea if you're not drinking it."

Princess Negative helped herself to the seat beside Shichika, and to his cup of tea.

Then, glancing at the notebook he was holding.

"Huh? What is this rubbish? Rejected—!"¹¹

She snatched away the notebook, tore out the open page, and crumpled it up in a ball.

This dramatic outburst was worse than any of Togame's tantrums, but Shichika privately admitted he had been unsatisfied with the drawing and planned to do it over anyway. And so he did not protest.

"Excuse me. Don't I get a thank you for culling your rejects?"

"Emonzaemon must have put up with a lot, working so many years for you... The thought of working under you gives me the shivers."

"I reject that. I'll have you know he was quite happy—although perhaps it's about time I stopped rejecting things left and right. Besides," said Princess Negative, sipping Shichika's tea. "We're guilty of the same heinous crime."¹² May as well buddy up—I can help out with the map you're making."

Making a map.

When Togame the Schemer promised Shichika they would make a map—she had lied.

If her take on the situation could be trusted, the plan was genuine, though she had no intention of following through.

But now Shichika was following through with things himself.

Making his crude drawings.

And his first step had been to visit the Hokuriku area, one of the few blank zones in the Sword Hunt.

“Yeah, but since my memory of everywhere we went is kinda fuzzy, I’ll probably have to make at least another trip around Japan...although I guess that means I’ll get to hang with Kiguchi and Konayuki and Azekura, so it’s not like it’s a bad thing.”

“Not like I can’t relate, but you’re a pretty carefree guy—don’t you realize that you’re being followed? Well, I guess those guys would never suspect a grand traitor lost to history would be hard at work making a map.”

“I have a hard time imagining a good reason why you would want to join me.”

“Please. Not even I would think of trying to reclaim my position after all that. Especially without Emonzaemon...”

Princess Negative—sounded oddly content.

As if this result.

As if this outcome—was not the slightest bit unsatisfying.

“As it turns out, Kiki Shikizaki lost. His miscalculations—stem back to the Old Shogun. Then, Takahito Hida...and his daughter, Princess Mercy, made all the difference.”¹³

“...”

“Why do you think Rinne Higaki buried Seito the Garland underground? It must have been to foil the Old Shogun in his search—thanks to which Takahito Hida realized something was wrong with history. Which led to his daughter—becoming the owner of the magnum opus, Kyoto the Diamond. Though as far as I can see...it hurt when the Hero of the Rebellion, Mutsue

Yasuri, took down Takahito Hida, only to be banished to that island along with Kyoto the Diamond—disappearing temporarily from history.”

“Banished is right,” said Shichika. “If you ask me, all that stuff about revising history is fantasy.¹⁴ I don’t believe in soothsaying or any of that junk. Far more likely this was all about avenging the murder of your parents, or what happens when love goes to your head. Maybe you’re right, and a hundred years from now, some people cross the sea and try to wipe us out—but all that means is that the folks living then need to find their resolve and fight.”

“It’s a pity your founder, Kazune Yasuri, didn’t say that to Kiki Shikizaki.”

Princess Negative broke into a wide grin.

“Well,” she continued, “we may have failed to revise history, but I think we’ve at least changed its course, so when those people come in a hundred years, they won’t wipe us out entirely. Let’s hope we see some spirit. Which reminds me. I totally forgot. Before I snuck out of Owari Castle, I doused the other nine hundred and eighty-eight Mutant Blades with saltwater. By now, they’ve probably begun to rust.”

“You sure know how to push things.”

“Since Zetto the Leveler was the only sword incapable of rusting, this just about wraps up the plot to revise history launched by my crazy ancestors.”

“Alright...”

“Though it wouldn’t surprise me if the Yanari Shogunate keeps bragging¹⁵ about owning all thousand of the Mutant Blades—including the twelve masterworks you personally destroyed. After all, they believe it guarantees the shogunate a thousand years of prosperity.”

“Yeah, but doesn’t that mean the Mutant Blades didn’t actually have the

power to let whoever owned them rule the world?”

“Not in reality. But you must not forget the illusion,” Princess Negative insisted.

“You’re evil, aren’t you,” said Shichika.

“I try,” responded Princess Negative. “So, how’s about you and me head off together—on a vacation for the brokenhearted.”

“Vacation for the brokenhearted—”¹⁶

Shichika—remembered.

The year he sacrificed¹⁷ for the Sword Hunt.

In the first moon—he met Togame.

In the second moon—he walked with Togame, through a desert.

In the third moon—he carried Togame up many steps.

In the fourth moon—he and Togame deepened their bond.

In the fifth moon—he and Togame took in the hot springs.

In the sixth moon—he and Togame climbed a mountain in a blizzard.

In the seventh moon—he and Togame made a pilgrimage to Seiryoin Gokenji Temple, a holy site for swordsmen.

In the eighth moon—he ferried Togame on his shoulders¹⁸ in their survey of Lake Fuyo.

In the ninth moon—he and Togame sucked each other’s lips.

In the tenth moon—he and Togame visited her hometown.

In the eleventh moon—he and Togame spoke of the future.

And at year's end—he and Togame parted ways.

“My heart isn't really broken.”

“No?”

“Don't tell me Emonzaemon hurt you any.”

“You're kidding—him, hurt me?” Princess Negative laughed derisively, as if Shichika's juvenile question was absurd. “Too bad you can't say the same, with all those scratches that he gave you—if the Kyotoryu is to go down in history for its heroics, then surely Emonzaemon will be infamous for cutting you up.”

“Don't forget that Konayuki broke my arm—granted, the blow she dealt me was not nearly as serious as the beating I got from Emonzaemon... For a minute I was sure that I was gonna die...but I suppose dying was my goal.”

“It's a wonder that you didn't die,” opined the princess.

“Thanks to this crazy getup.”

Shichika grabbed the sleeves of the kimono he was wearing—and fluttered them for her.

That brilliant finery—those flamboyant women's kimonos.

“I'm lucky I was wearing Togame's clothes—I used to joke about them being thick as body armor, but in reality, every layer of these rags makes an enormous difference.”

“Especially when you're wearing what, two dozen layers? Ironically, the precision of those shots meant that the deflections curbed their impact, however slightly. Hahaha wow—those robes are like your take on Zokuto the Armor.”

“Yeah, but since Togame died when she was wearing the exact same clothes,

the fact that I survived was definitely a miracle.”

Even if Emonzaemon had aimed his shots precisely, to avoid her vital organs—Togame had only been able to conduct such a lengthy exchange with Shichika, even after being gunned down, because her countless layers¹⁹ lessened the impact of the bullets.

But even that—was quite a miracle.

Shichika was sure of it.

“No way.”

True to character, Princess Negative rejected Shichika’s view.

Rejecting him, with gusto—

“Shichika, this is when you’re supposed to say, ‘Togame died so I could live,’ hamming it up and summing up²⁰ the situation.”

“...”

“Forget every layer—every sheet of shoji paper makes a difference.”

“In that case,” Shichika said, releasing the sleeves of his kimono, “maybe I should follow through on one last order from Togame.”

“Huh?”

“She told me—to live my life.”

Neither love nor romance.

Thus had Rinne Higaki evaluated Shichika’s feelings for Togame.

And finally, he was beginning to see why.

Perhaps these were the naive feelings of an island yokel who misunderstood the world.

And yet—he remained confident.

Knowing, in all certainty—he had fallen for this woman named Togame.

That he had cherished her.

He was sure.

And so—as time went on.

He would continue learning about people and the world, maintaining a sense of purpose—and living life on his own terms.

“Alright, let’s go,” he said.

“Not going’s not an option.”

Shichika stood up and stuffed his notebook in the furoshiki, pulled out what he owed for the tea and dango and left it on his seat, and started off—with Princess Negative following close behind.

And so the two of them walked down the road of hardpacked sand.

“Shichika, what’ll we do next?”

“I think I’ve seen enough of Noto—maybe I’ll head to Kaga.”²¹

“Kaga is wealthy, you know. Perhaps it’s time you replenished your coffers.”²²

“I’ll let you worry about that. If you’re gonna tag along, try helping out a little.”

“Harsh words. Sort of reminds me of someone I used to know.”

“Leave the fighting to me. If anyone comes after us, I’ll handle them—the wounds I got from Emonzaemon haven’t quite healed yet, but I’m strong enough to protect one woman.”

“Is that right. I’ll leave it up to you, then.”

“Sounds good. But it’s too bad you’ll be torn to smithereens.”

“Why?!”

Joking around with one another.

This giant man with tousled hair, caparisoned in brash and brilliant finery, and this blond-haired blue-eyed woman, dressed in a Japanese kimono, a bizarre mask strapped to the side of her head—probably the most conspicuous pair of outlaws²³ you could ask for, departed Noto for their next destination.

Shichika Yasuri and Princess Negative.

The last person who could testify to having seen them was the owner of the teahouse—for thereafter, the two of them disappeared without a trace. Whether they actually headed for Kaga—or paid a visit to Shogi Village in Tendo, or Triad Shrine, or Dakuon Harbor, to call upon old acquaintances, has been lost to the sands of time.

Perhaps they died somewhere on the wayside, left in a ditch, or perhaps they finished off their map of Japan with flying colors, then set their sights overseas and continued their journey.

Regardless of what happened, there is no way of knowing now.

And yet, once everything was over—after the historically minded intrigue involving humans and swords ended in failure, the two of them lived on, for however long or short a period of time.

And surely—this is what anyone would hope for them.

Those who failed to exact their revenge.

Those who failed to reach their goals.

Those who died unsatisfied, those who could not carry out their will.

The defeated. The thwarted. The blighted.

To all of those who try as hard as they possibly can, sacrificing everything they have, but wind up getting nowhere anyway, every effort falling short, and those who die unreasonable, irrational, truly awful, truly humiliating deaths, drowning in regret—I offer you this buoyant tale, filled with dreams and aspirations, and hinting at the future—a story which I now bring softly to a close.

Ento the Bead: Check

End of Book Twelve

End of the Sword Tale

Thanks for Reading

¹ 無人島は無人島へ MUJINTŌ WA MUJINTŌ E “from unpeopled isle to unpeopled isle”

² 類稀なる TAGUI MARE NARU “of rare variety”

³ 肉体美 NIKUTAIBI “meat-form beauty” physical beauty, *i.e.* of the human form

⁴ 永久凍土 EIKYŪ TŌDO permafrost 永久 EIKYŪ eternal 凍てつく ITETSUKU freezing 土 TSUCHI soil shares character with 凍空 ITEZORA frozen sky

⁵ 閑古鳥が鳴く KANKODORI GA NAKU “the cuckoo cries” excessive stillness; the doldrums

⁶ 居城 KYOJŌ castle where a lord resides

⁷ 能登 NOTO historic name for the northern region of Ishikawa Prefecture

⁸ 星砂 HOSHISUNA “star sand”

⁹ 編み笠 AMIGASA woven straw hat often associated with mendicant Buddhist monks

¹⁰ 気品 KIHIN grace

¹¹ 没 BOTSU shorthand for 没書, a rejected manuscript; nixed

¹² 同じ凶状持ち同士 ONAJI KYŌJŌ MOCHI DŌSHI being fellow criminals (*i.e.* with criminal records)

13 決定的 KETTEITEKI crucial, decisive (role)

14 夢物語 YUMEMONOGATARI “dream tale”

15 喧伝 KENDEN propagate

16 傷心旅行 SHŌSHIN RYOKŌ “wounded-heart journey” usu. after a breakup vs. 傷ひとつ付けずに KIZU HITOTSU TSUKEZU NI without a scratch

17 殉じた JUNJITA devoted oneself entirely; gave one’s life (for a cause)

18 肩車 KATAGURUMA “shoulder wheels”

19 厚着 ATSUGI “thick wear” stacking oneself with garments (to stay warm)

20 格好つけ 決めつけ KAKKŌ TSUKE KIME TSUKE cutting a figure deciding one-sidedly

21 加賀 KAGA historic name for the southern region of present-day Ishikawa Prefecture

22 軍資金 GUNSHIKIN “war funds” bankroll for a (military, political) campaign

23 お尋ね者 OTAZUNE MONO wanted (by the law)



AGE	Unknown
OCCUPATION	Inspector
AFFILIATION	Owari Bakufu
STATUS	Lieutenant
POSSESSED	Ento the Bead
HEIGHT	6' 1"
WEIGHT	131 lbs.
HOBBY	Tidying up (behind the ceiling)

LIST OF
SPECIAL MOVES

SHADOW FIST	⇐ (HOLD) ⇒ THRUST
ENDLESSLY UNSPARING	⇐⇨⇩⇧⇨ SLASH
VOCAL CRAFT	⇧⇧⇩⇩ KICK + THRUST
DECAPITATION CYCLONE	⇐⇨⇧⇨⇨ SLASH + THRUST



AGE	Twenty-four
OCCUPATION	Warrior
AFFILIATION	Kyotoryu
STATUS	Master
POSSESSED	None
HEIGHT	6' 10"
WEIGHT	175 lbs.
HOBBY	None

LIST OF
SPECIAL MOVES

KYOGA SUIGETSU	↵↶↓ SLASH + THRUST
KACHO FUGETSU	↑↷↵ SLASH
HYAKKA RYORAN	↵ (HOLD) SLASH ↷ THRUST
RYURYOKU KAKO	↑↷↵ THRUST
HIKA RAKUYO	THRUST + KICK (RAPID FIRE)
KINJO TENKA	↓↷↵ SLASH + THRUST + KICK
RAKKA ROZEKI	↑ (HOLD) ↓ KICK
SHICHIKA HACHIRETSU	↵↷↑↓↵↷ SLASH + THRUST + KICK
SHICHIKA HACHIRETSU (REDUX)	↵↷↷↑↑↓↓↵↷↷ SLASH + THRUST + KICK



AGE	Unknown
OCCUPATION	Schemer
AFFILIATION	Owari Bakufu
STATUS	Grand Commander
POSSESSED	Kyoto the Diamond
HEIGHT	4' 10"
WEIGHT	74 lbs.
HOBBY	Trickery

LIST OF
SPECIAL MOVES

CHEERIO (ONE)	THRUST
CHEERIO (TWO)	KICK
CHEERIO (THREE)	SLASH
CHEERIO (FOUR)	BASH
CHEERIO (FIVE)	BOUNCE
CHEERIO (SIX)	THROW
CHEERIO (SEVEN)	SQUEEZE
CHEERIO (EIGHT)	TRICK

CHARACTER
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PRINCESS NEGATIVE



AGE	Unknown
OCCUPATION	Inspector
AFFILIATION	Owari Bakufu
STATUS	Inspector General
POSSESSED	None
HEIGHT	5' 6"
WEIGHT	114 lbs.
HOBBY	Trickery

LIST OF
SPECIAL MOVES

METAL FAN	⇩⇧⇨ THRUST
SINGLE NEGATIVE	⇐ (HOLD) ⇨ LIE
DOUBLE NEGATIVE	⇐ (HOLD) ⇨ DENY
TRIPLE NEGATIVE	⇐ (HOLD) ⇨ SHY

I talk a lot about goals, and about the plans you make to reach them, but once you start talking about goals and steps, it can be pretty hard to stop. Even when your goals and plans are sound, things can always go awry, just as it's a fairly common thing for people to royally screw up their goals and plans only to arrive at what is basically a happy end. It's a mystery why things turn out this way, but the key to understanding this mystery is surprisingly clear and simple: people have a way of adjusting their goals and plans depending on when and how things go. In other words, we play it by ear. "Oh crap, if things keep heading in this direction, I'm screwed. What am I gonna do... Oh, I guess I could act like I planned this all along." Sound familiar? How about this: "Man, this is definitely not going to work out okay...what now? Oh...right, if I tweak things in such and such a way, I might even reach my goal faster than planned. Perhaps." Perhaps?! When a person has a change of heart like this, it makes sense that an onlooker would observe that things worked out "in the end," without a sense of contradiction. It's relatively difficult for a person to persistently maintain a single objective, a single plan, a single goal, but the exact way in which we stray from our original intentions varies so much from person to person that it scarcely shows up on the record. Flip through a history textbook and you'll find what sounds like a coherent narrative, but is that actually possible? It stands to reason that the main players of history were playing it by ear, too, and sometimes even shooting in the dark, making things up as they went along, reneging them as needed. Isn't it a little bit romantic for things to wind up looking whole like a story "in the end"?

This is the last book of the *Sword Tale*. I'm not sure what to say, except that we've made it to the conclusion. Some of you out there might not actually be so thrilled, or may be thinking, "Whoa, he actually ended the story, what the hell!" This tale of the journey of Togame the Schemer and Shichika Yasuri, Seventh Master of the Kyotoryu, has turned out to be different from any other story I have written thus far, unique from start to finish. I tried to wrap things up inside the confines of the story, and think the books speak for themselves, so I'll be quiet now and leave it at that, closing out at least the last of the twelve books in the normal fashion, with acknowledgments. Even if it was my idea, there's no way an author can carry out a plan like this alone. On the contrary. While I was constantly debating whether it was time to call it quits, the staff assigned to this epic novel offered stern, unfaltering encouragement throughout the year, for which I owe them a lifelong debt of gratitude. If our illustrator, *take*, is the star of the show, then the staff were the stage crew, the lead behind the scenes. So many people helped make this series possible that it's impossible to list everybody here, but I'd like to offer extra special thanks to Katsushi Ota, Yuki Shibayama, and Kimihito Iwai.

And so this was *Sword Tale, Book Twelve: Ento the Bead*.

As always, my readers deserve the ultimate thanks, for sticking around to the very end.

Thanks to you, dear reader, another wonderful tale was born.

Palindromic **NISIOISIN** made his debut as a novelist when he was twenty. Famously prolific, he is known to publish more than a book per month at times and is a leading light among writers who began their careers in the twenty-first century.

Beloved illustrator **take** is also known for adorning the *Zaregoto* mystery cycle with striking visuals.

Sam Bett won Grand Prize in the 2016 JLPP International Translation Competition. With David Boyd, he is cotranslating the novels of Mieko Kawakami.



KATANAGATARI 4

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